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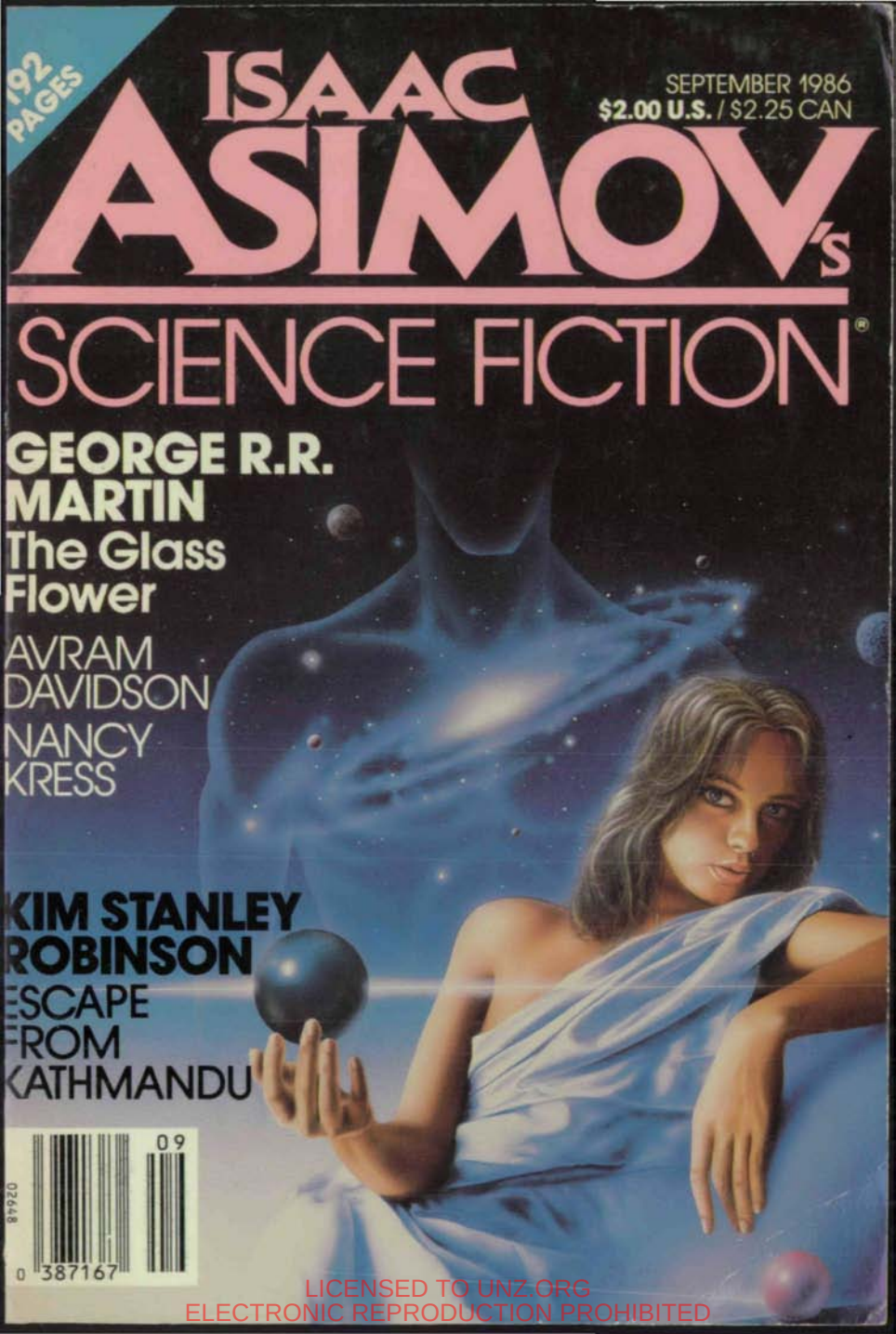

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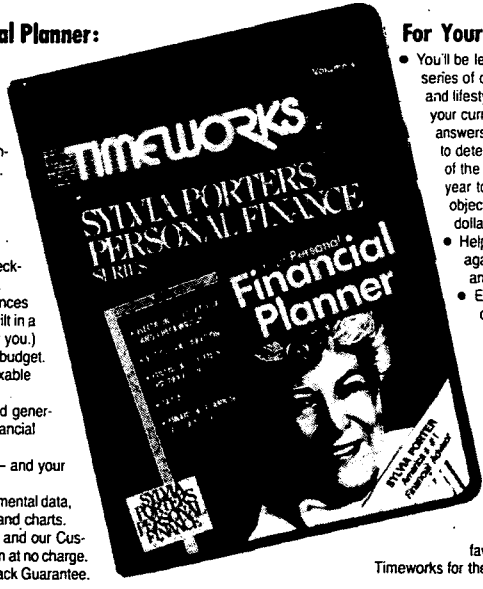

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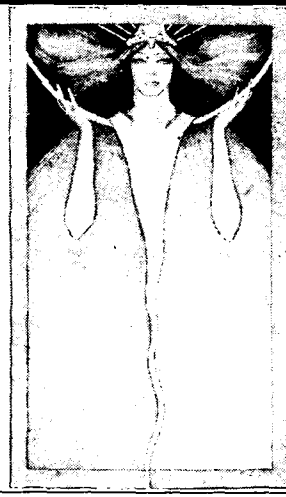

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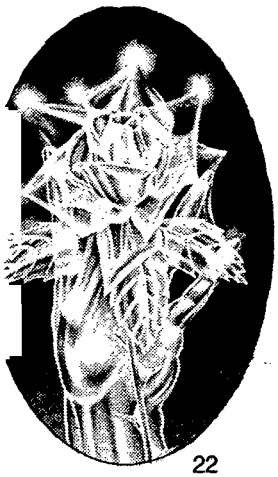

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

INTEGRITY

In the February 16, 1981 issue of *Asimov's,* nearly six years ago, I wrote an editorial entitled "Book Reviews." I thought I had disposed of the subject on that occasion and I didn't think I would have occasion to write about it again.

However, unexpected things can happen, and in this case a kind of mini-crisis has arisen. Mind you, not to *this* magazine, but it has arisen in another magazine, and the same sort of thing *might* arise here. It is a matter that I would think about even if I knew for certain that we were immune to the problem, but since we aren't, the thought is even more essential. Fortunately, I like thinking.

What happens, for instance, if a book review gives offense. Naturally, we try to take what measures we can, given what native intelligence and decency we have, to avoid that as much as possible. Thus, we naturally try to hire a reviewer who is thoroughly professional and capable.

Our man on books, for instance, is Baird Searles. We have had him on the job from the very beginning and he has (so far) produced no crisis for us. What's more, he has written what have always seemed to us to be perfectly reasonable and useful reviews.

Naturally, we don't ask Baird to do the impossible. Suppose, for instance, he decided to review one of my books. Nothing he did would seem satisfactory. If he honestly liked it, and said so, the readers would not be impressed. They might assume that Baird was simply trying to stay in good with the "boss." Or, if he honestly disliked it, and said so, the reaction might be, "Wow! Can you imagine what he would say if he weren't pulling his punches?"

In other words, Baird would be bound to be misinterpreted whatever he did in such a case, and neither he nor I could afford that. It is not only important to *have* integrity, but to be *seen* to have integrity.

The result is, then, that Baird does *not* review my books, or those of anyone connected with every issue of the magazine. He mentions the existence of such books and lets it go at that. That's nothing unusual. I believe this sort of thing is done in other magazines or newspapers that publish book reviews.

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But suppose Baird were to write a review of someone else's book and it proved offensive.

To whom?—Well, to begin with, to us, to Sheila, or to Gardner, or to me.

Why? Simply because he was praising a book one or more of us thought was terrible? Or panning a book we thought was great?

In that case, tough on us. We have no right to object. Baird works for the magazine for the purpose of expressing *his* opinions of a book, not ours.

The same would be true if the author of the book objected to the nature of a review. We'd be sorry, indeed; we don't want to make anyone unhappy if we can avoid it; but we're paying for Baird's opinion, not the author's.

But what if the review were legitimately offensive? For instance, suppose it contained errors that made it look as though the book had not been read carefully. Suppose the author is accused of being ignorant of the fact that Mars is smaller than Earth, when actually he has mentioned the matter in two different places. Or suppose, on the basis of the views of one of the characters in the book, the reviewer accuses the author of being a racist. That would be wrong, too, for we review the *book* and not the author, and we understand that the views of the characters in a book do not necessarily reflect those of the author. In either case, an apology is due and (after consulting with the reviewer) one would be offered. The

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review might even be altered if the author had seen the content before it had been published.

Fortunately, Baird has *never* gotten us into this kind of trouble.

But suppose the review is simply an unfavorable review, and has nothing in it that requires an apology. And suppose an author says, "Look, if you give me another bad review like that, I'm not going to submit any more stories to you."

If he's an important writer, that's not something we would like to hear, but, on the other hand, it's something that's extremely unlikely to happen. In fact, I've never known it to happen. Professional writers, however much they may dislike unfavorable reviews, accept it as a fact of life, and are resigned to it.

But there's another kind of pressure, harder to avoid.

What if a *publisher* takes offense at a perfectly unexceptional review that has only the demerit of being unfavorable? And what if that publisher advertises regularly in the magazine? And what if he says, "If you give me bad reviews like that, I'm pulling my advertisements out of the magazine."? And what if his ads are an important source of revenue for the magazine?

No, it hasn't happened to us yet, but it has happened to another magazine, and it might happen to us. And, if it does, what do we do?

There are several alternatives, of course. We might cave in, for instance, and pull the review. We might then go to the book reviewer and say, "Listen, go easy on any books put out by this publisher. We need his money."

This instantly vitiates the whole purpose of a book review column and if the book-reviewer has professional integrity, he would quit his job at once. In fact, if pressure were put on an editor by the business officials of a magazine to issue such orders to the book-reviewer, the editor, himself, might resign on the spot.

What's more, it wouldn't be so easy to find a new book-reviewer who would be willing to cut his opinions to suit an advertising publisher, or a new editor who would be willing to pressure a book-reviewer to do so. And if replacements were found who were willing to do this sort of thing, I'm sure they would be too sleazy in character to do their jobs well.

So, really, that can't be done.

Well, perhaps, you can weaken the cave-in. You can say to the book-reviewer, "Listen, be good-natured in general. Say nice things to everyone." You would still be asking him to lie, though.

Or perhaps you might say, "I don't want you to lie, but just don't review books you don't like. Review only the ones you like."

In that case, you would have an unbearably bland column. I knew a book reviewer once who praised everyone he reviewed. I used to love to have him review me, but I found, after a while, that I didn't particularly value his reviews of

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Her first solo mission has just become her own private war

F.M. BUSBY
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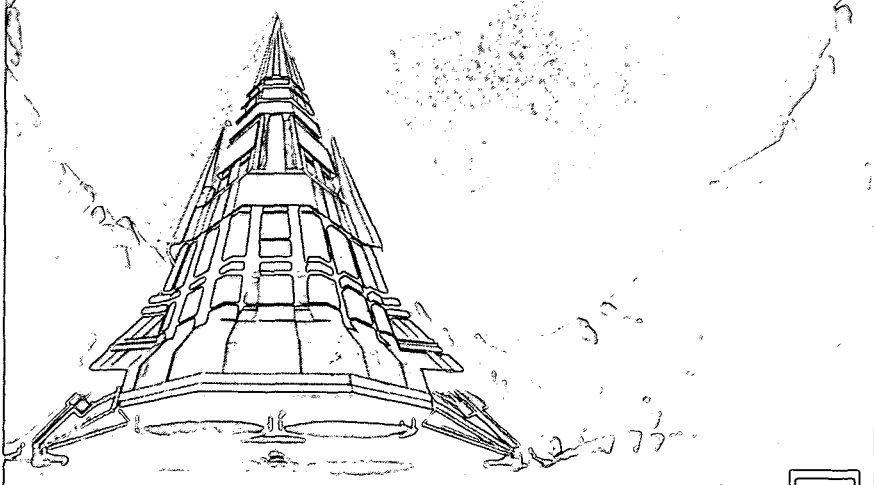

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me, or of anyone else either. There is no delight in the praise of a particular book, if all books get pretty much the same praise.

Besides, the advertiser would get restive. He wouldn't be content to have his books ignored; he'd want them *reviewed*—and *favorably*.

The next alternative might be simply to drop the book review column. If we do that, however, we are depriving the reader of a valuable service. It is difficult, these days, to read all the SF books that are published. It is therefore extremely useful to have a person with a trusted judgment estimating the worth of various books and giving you some clue as to which to investigate, with possible purchase in mind.

And even this would be a cave-in. Any cave-in at all would sharpen the blood-lust of the advertiser and urge him to get after the next magazine.

Well, then, what do we do if we can't cave in?—We might try reasoning with the advertiser. We would point out that the magazine can't be expected to compromise its integrity; that removing the advertisement would hurt the advertiser as well as the magazine; that if word got out as to *why* the advertiser removed his advertising (and word would surely get out, somehow) that would be very bad publicity for the advertiser. Any favorable reviews he got for his books, thereafter, would be tainted in the minds of the readers. The magazine, on the other hand, would be admired for its integrity.

But what if the advertiser won't listen to reason and puts matters into ultimatum-form. "Either I get favorable reviews or I pull out."

It seems to me that there is, in that case, only one thing to do. We say, "Good-bye, sir."

And what do we then do about the lost advertising income? Davis Publications is a strong and honest firm, but it is not exactly Time-Life Books or the Reader's Digest. It can't afford to support forever a magazine that doesn't pay its own way.

Well, we'd try to replace the lost advertising—or, if necessary, we'd try to get along without the revenue by various economies—or, if all else fails, we'd go under.

It is not written in the stars that *Asimov's* must endure forever.

It *is* written in the stars, however, that *Asimov's* must maintain its integrity. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Doctor:

I can't believe it—I'm actually sitting at my word processor writing a fan letter to a magazine. Guess there is a first time for everything. I really don't have to tell you what a splendid job you are doing, I bet you already know that (don't you, dear Doktor?!).

I've been a devoted fan of yours for several years now and it's always one of the high points in every month when I find the magazine in my mailbox. Too bad the contents are devoured by the next day, but over the years, it is always a pleasure to go back to a particularly appealing story and savor it again at leisure. I was terribly proud of myself for having picked last year's Hugo winner, "PRESS ENTER■," which is one of my personal favorites. No, it hasn't made me leery of computers, I'm still totally fascinated by them. As I have gathered from letters from other readers, I'm not the only one turning first to the "Letters" section (the good Doctor's Editorials are second—sorry). I have followed with interest the opinions "for" and "against" stories with overtones of religion, sex, and what-have-you's that offend certain segments, and find that Ms. McCarthy's taste is unimpeachable when it comes to picking stories where "questionable" contents are definitely not of the gratuitous kind but add to the story; at times, these elements *are* the story. Besides, is there anything, anywhere, in this world where someone, somewhere, does not take offense? Very unlikely. It's the same with adult bookstores and adult movie houses—so who's forcing you to take part? And please try not to spoil life for the rest of us. But really, enough of that, that old horse has by now been practically beaten to death. That's not why I'm writing this letter, anyway. After reading the December issue, I just wanted to tell you that never in my life has a story touched me like "O Little Town of Bethlehem II" (Robert F. Young). By the time I was through reading it, I had tears in my eyes and goosebumps up and down my back. Is there really no hope for humankind? What a poignant editorial that story makes for the so-called "Moral Majority"—who, unfortunately, will probably never even hear of it. What a shameful waste!

In closing, let me again congratulate you on the tremendous magazine you put out and the consistent quality of the contents. The news of Ms. McCarthy's abdication leaves me looking forward to subsequent issues with some trepidation. Even though I could call myself quite

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progressive, I do believe that when something works, don't fix it. Therefore, I hope the new editor will somehow manage to follow in her footsteps (it would be hard to surpass that lady!), and that the changes won't be too drastic. I enjoyed her touch and wish her all the best for the future. By the way, I just had a great idea about what could be done about the above-mentioned malcontents: One might direct them to the nearest Christian Science reading room. . . .

Faithfully yours,

Charlotte E. Lieser
Council Bluffs, IA

Please understand that we did not boot out Shawna in order to "fix" the magazine. Leaving was entirely her own idea because she felt she could better herself (and I certainly hope she has).

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov, Mr. Dozois, & Co:

The January issue was uniformly magnificent, with William Gibson's *Count Zero* as its master/center-piece. However, it was not your first serial ever. My first issue of *IAsfm,* back in 1978 or '79, contained Part Four of a serial, by Robert Silverberg if memory serves; in a subsequent issue, an editorial note (by George Scithers) made it clear that, while serials were not going to be a part of *IAsfm*'s regular fare, novels of exceptional quality might be run.

I hope the new administration finds it expedient to adhere to this philosophy.

Anatoly Belilovsky
Hartford, CT

The first two chapters of Foundation's Edge *were also run in the December 1982 issue. However, we're now talking of a whole novel, in parts; and not of part of a novel.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I recently subscribed to your fine magazine after years of picking up copies at the bookstore. I was, of course, overjoyed to receive my first copy in the mailbox; however, I was somewhat disappointed to find that it included Part I of your first serialization, William Gibson's *Count Zero* (January 1986).

When I bought my SF mags at the bookstore, I always looked to see if they contained serials. If they did, I put them back. I could never see the point of serials. In fact, I think it's plain unfair to occupy over a third of a magazine's space with this sort of redundancy. If I want to read *Count Zero,* I can always wait a few months and buy the complete novel—thereby saving myself the irritation of reading a fraction of the story and being forced to wait a whole month for more. (In my opinion *Count Zero,* with its complex multiple plot structure, made an especially poor choice for serialization.) It happens I didn't care much for *Count Zero* and would not have purchased it as a paperback—and I resent having it forced on me. I feel the space in a magazine should be reserved for shorter fiction which has no chance of appearing elsewhere.

It seems to me that the only person who benefits from serialization is the author, who collects royalties twice.

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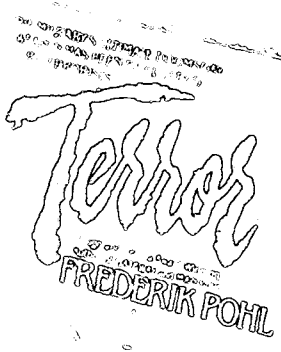
A TERRIFYING NEW MASTERWORK BY

FREDERIK POHL

Terror



Clouded in secrecy and protected from land, sea, and air, Project Vulcan would tap the life-energy of the Earth's core. The doomsday bomb carefully placed at the weakest edge of an underwater volcano off the Hawaiian coast would cover the Earth in a dust cloud that would bring food production to a grinding halt.

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To conclude, I doubt that my one letter will affect your editorial policy, but I wanted to make my feelings known. Aside from this gripe I enjoy most of your material and I still look forward to my monthly copy.

Laura Todd
Oaks, PA

You can also save the three issues of the magazine in which the serial appears and then read it all in one piece—for less than the price of the book edition, and with other stories added. Have you never thought of that?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

In the Letters column of the Mid-December issue you state that the twenty-eight day menstrual cycle has no connection with the moon.

Air Force physicist Dr. E. M. Dewan who specializes in linear oscillations suggests that women are irregular because of artificial lighting and irregularities. In his view the full Moon probably served as a clock to regulate the fertility cycle.

With psychiatrist Dr. John Rock he performed an experiment with women which involved leaving a light on for three nights in their bedroom starting the fourteenth day after menstruation. All the women, who had problems with irregularity, regularized their cycle.

According to my source, these results have been published in the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

Devon A. Taylor
Stockton, NY

I imagine there are lots of women who are quite regular despite artificial lighting and irregularity. Since most women sleep indoors where moonlight can't get at them, and since, thanks to clouds, moonlight shines down irregularly anyway, I think we'll have to go a lot farther than Rock's experiment to settle the matter in favor of lunar influence.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov;

Although I often glance at the volume number on the masthead of my favorite magazines, I must confess that the event of the publication of your hundredth issue slipped up on me. Congratulations!

As a long-time reader and fan —dating from your late 1930s pulp magazine days—I admit that your name on the cover was the initial attraction when I subscribed to the magazine in 1978. I have not regretted this action. The endeavors of all of you have caused the venture to steadily increase in the quality of stories, authors, editorials, and nonfiction articles; the frequency of issue!; and my appreciation and enjoyment of your collective efforts.

One of the first sections of the magazine that I read is "Letters"; it is of interest to me to see what the "rest of us" are thinking. In spite of the protests and lamentations of would-be authors, crusaders and axe-grinders, the general tone of approval here should indicate to you that all is well, most are happy, and that your jointly produced issues succeed in pleasing most of your readers most of the time. What more can you seek?

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Having been a science fiction enthusiast for nearly fifty years, I have seen and experienced the many and varied trends through which our literature has journeyed during this time. Reflecting the various moods and topical interests, and scientific achievements and viewpoints throughout this period, some of these trends have been more enjoyable to me than others. In this respect, I buy reading matter for enjoyment. If I don't like it, I purchase elsewhere. I don't feel that I should deride an author's or editor's efforts if I don't agree with them or don't personally enjoy those efforts.

I have thoroughly enjoyed the vast majority of your output, so I will continue to do so without further comment—unless strongly moved to further expression. Again, my sincere contratulations.

With warmest regards,

Robert B. Phillips
St. Louis, MO

Let's see if you and I can't both be around when we celebrate our two hundredth issue. In fact, while I don't look forward to leaving this earthly scene of woe, I can't help hope that this magazine, like Ellery Queen *and* Alfred Hitchcock, *our cousins at Davis Publications, outlives its eponym.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac, Gardner, & Co.;

Congratulations on running your first serial, *Count Zero,* by William Gibson. I'm sure you all must be very pleased with it.

However, there is one small cloud in the situation, and I regret having to bring it to your attention. In the December 1979 and January 1980 issues of *Asimov's,* you ran "Like Unto the Locust," by Frederik Pohl. You referred to it as a "two-part serial" in the comments. To the uninitiated, it might seem that this, being run in two parts and including a "What has gone before" segment in front of the second part, *might* be considered your first serial.

I would have written sooner about this, but the press of events and activities prevented me. I write now, as soon as possible, lest this letter, along with you all and the offices of Davis Publications, be buried under an avalanche of mail saying exactly the same thing.

Sincerely,

Robert Nowall
Box 371
Cape Coral, FL 33910-0371

The difference is that each of the two parts by Pohl could be read independently in my opinion. Gibson's serial has to be read as a serial. In other words, it isn't what you call it; it's what it is.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editors,

In the December 1985 issue of *IAsfm,* Martin Gardner makes a common error. He states: "Hundreds of SF tales anticipated moon walks; not one guessed that the first walk would be observed on earth by television."

However, in *Master of Space,* by Arthur C. Clarke (Lancer Books edition, published 1961) on page 104 planners of the first moon shot are asked about the landing. The

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reply is: "Before they leave the ship, they'll broadcast a description of everything they see, and the television cameras will be set panning. So we should have some really good pictures—it's a full color system, by the way.

"... Thanks to the television link, anything that's discovered can be shown immediately to us back on Earth."

It is evident that television is an integral part of the planned expedition.

April Kihlstrom
Cherry Hill, NJ

P.S. My husband and I enjoy *IAsfm* very much. And although it has been quite a while, I would like to thank Elissa Malcohn for writing "Lazuli" (Nov. '84). I found it a very powerful, very moving story of child abuse.

Don't blame Martin Gardner. It was I who said it, in print, over and over. Martin may simply have committed the sin of assuming I was right. The real puzzle is that Arthur never wrote to me to point out my error. He's no more backward at laying claim to rightful credit than I am.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I feel that your answer to John Aldrich's question in the January letters section may have been unintentionally misleading.

Aldrich asked whether it would be plagiarism if he adapted a published story as a scenario for the (private) use of his gaming group. You replied that he would need the author's permission.

Now the simple fact is that the private use of an adaptation by maybe a half-dozen gamers would be so trivial an infringement on the author's trademark rights in the characters and storyline that neither the law nor any rational person would take any notice of it. (Copyright law doesn't apply, of course, because very few of the actual words in the story would carry over into the scenario. But if it did, the situation would probably come under the fair use doctrine and we'd end up in the same place.)

Of course, if Aldrich were planning to write up a scenario for commercial publication—even publication in a semi-pro gaming magazine at $5.00 a page—he would definitely need the author's permission. And since you were talking about commercial publication in the editorial that sparked Aldrich's letter, I feel sure that's what you had in mind when you replied. But that's not what he asked, so the potential for misleading the unwary reader is quite real.

What I'm really afraid of is that hundreds (thousands?) of gamers will write to authors requesting permission for their groups to play this or that story. And while it must be a egoboo for an author to know his/her story is appreciated, I doubt if many will enjoy writing dozens of letters graciously granting permission that wasn't necessary in the first place.

But please don't take this as a criticism. If even Homer nods, it's understandable that Asimov might blink once in a while.

Sincerely,

W. A. Thomasson
Oak Park, IL

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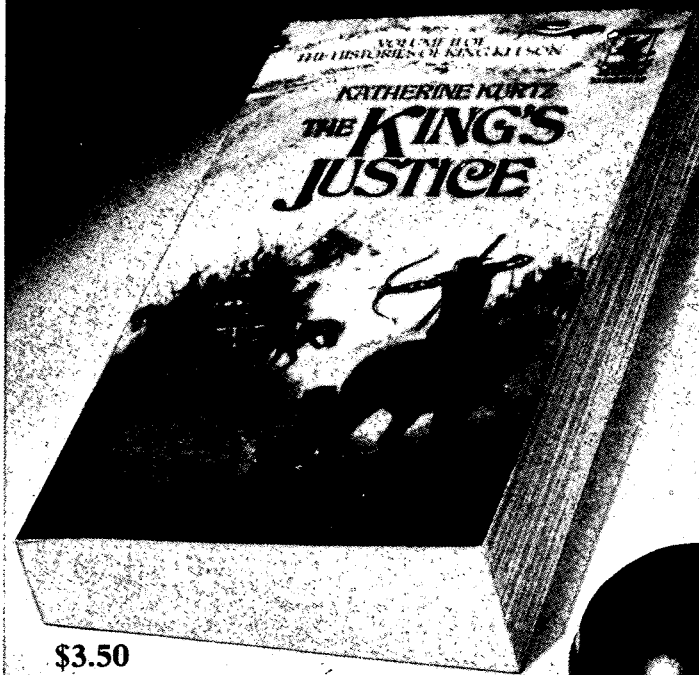
JUSTICE FOR ALL!



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—Anne McCaffrey

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P.S. I strongly support your (Shawna's? Gardner's?) decision to publish William Gibson's *Count Zero* as a serial. I feel that the praise of *Neuromancer* has been, on the whole, too tepid. And while *Count Zero* is starting off slowly—what else do you expect when you have three apparently unrelated stories going at once? —I'm sure I'm going to enjoy it greatly before it's over. It's just one more reason to wait for *IAsfm* each month.

I'm not sure that I understand the law, but if it's possible to adapt the story to a game, why isn't it possible to adapt the story to a movie, to a play, to a television show with the same careless, "Oh, this is trivial" attitude. Spielberg is putting out Amazing Stories *as a television series. He is using nothing of the magazine but the title, but he paid for it handsomely. Why don't the gamers make up their own scenario?*

—Isaac Asimov

NEXT ISSUE

Connie Willis returns to *IAsfm* next month with "Spice Program," our October cover story, a fast-paced and pyrotechnic screwball comedy which takes a new and very funny look at the old theme of First Contact with aliens. The Eahrohhs, and especially Mr. Ohghhifoehn-ahigrheeh, love to shop (going on sprees where they buy things like a six-foot Buddha, two dozen baseball caps, and a piano), and are *very* particular about the proper pronunciation of names—which sometimes makes it difficult to figure out just what they're offering for trade, let alone what they want... This may be one of the funniest stories of the year, so don't miss it. Nebula and Hugo-winner Kate Wilhelm is also on hand for October, with a very different kind of tale, the brilliant, bittersweet, and troubling story of "The Girl Who Fell Into the Sky."

Also in October: Neal Barrett, Jr. makes his *IAsfm* debut with the chilling "Trading Post," a story that also examines the concept of interstellar trade, but from a perspective considerably grittier and harder-edged than that of the Willis novella; hot new writer Lewis Shiner takes us to the steaming jungles of the Yucatan for a glimpse of the Wrath To Come, in "Cabracan"; Isaac Asimov, the Good Doctor himself, offers up the latest of the George and Azazel stories in "The Mind's Construction"; and Lucius Shepard contributes a powerful and controversial poem about the space-shuttle disaster, "Challenger as Viewed from the Westerbrook Bar." Plus our usual columns and features. Look for the October issue on your newsstands August 26.

COMING UP: new stories by Lucius Shepard, Orson Scott Card, Jack McDevitt, Cherry Wilder, Isaac Asimov, Ian Watson, Frederik Pohl, John M. Ford, Harry Turtledove, Nancy Kress, Harlan Ellison, Kim Stanley Robinson, Pat Murphy, Rudy Rucker, and many others.

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

In an era of increased technological ease, with our remote-controlled lives and microwaved cuisine, many fantasy and science fiction board games require a kind of old-fashioned "stick-to-itness." You have to work, really work at playing some of these flights of fancy. And I kind of like that . . . up to a point.

But games are, after all games. And no matter how complex (or simple, for that matter) they should be produced with the realization that humans will play them.

Now don't get me wrong. *Dark Emperor,* the new fantasy game I'm reviewing, is no complicated monster. It is in fact an extremely intriguing game of a necromancer leading an army of the undead to attack the living. But it could certainly have been made more user-friendly and easier to play. But more of that anon.

Dark Emperor (The Avalon Hill Game Company, $19.00) is designed by game-wunderkind Greg Costikyan, much respected for his work on *Toon, Paranoia, Bug-Eyed Monsters,* and a host of other games. Greg's games are never dull, always challenging, and generously laced with exciting ideas.

In this magnum opus, we are presented with the magical world of Loslon, a strange place made up of impact craters. The land forms of this world consists of the overlapping ridges of the craters, beautifully depicted on the map board. Loslon is divided into ten kingdoms, each with a short history supplied in the introduction. There are counters for the kingdom's forces, as well as special leaders and objects. These include: Cos Dol Cos, a member of an anti-magic cult, Silwer Flagriel a crazed arsonist who seeks to burn out evil, The Sword Famir, a weapon that can kill the Lord of Death himself, and The Silk Negator, a cloth that nullifies any magic.

In the game, the slumbering kingdoms of Loslon are invaded by Padrech dar Choim, the Great Necromancer. Padrech, with his pals Tol Morn, Lord of the Vampires, and Mezal, Avatar of the goddess Szanbu (Mistress of Fear and Terror, but surely you knew that) plan on waging war on Loslon, winner take all.

One player takes the Necromancer's part (my personal favorite) while the other takes control of Loslon's activated kingdoms. The Necromancer's initial forces of

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vampire units and a siege train appear in one kingdom and, at start, only that kingdom is active.

I hit a rather immediate bric wall in setting up *Dark Empero.* There seemed to be no clue as to what units went with what kingdom. A rather long search produced an Appendix, cleverly placed at the end of the rule book, which gave just that information.

The turn sequence in the game runs smoothly with only a few difficulties. The Necromancer player goes first, with any kingdom's allied to it collecting taxes. Then Padrech can recruit any vampire units that he's entitled to. He then moves, fights, and carries on his other worldly diplomacy, all preceeded by a magic sequence. Diplomacy is very important as the Dark Emperor can attempt to sway neutral mercenaries or kingdoms. The kingdom player follows a similar sequence and, on odd numbered turns, elects a new Doge of Kelaron, the controller of the powerful Torch of Liberty.

The heart of the game is its magic system. Magic spells can be cast before the Movement, Combat, and Diplomacy phases with dramatic results on each. Only leaders can use magic, and the type of magic they use depends on the rune they carry (Life, Death, Water, Fire, etc.). A leader carries a magic strength and, if he rolls under that number, the spell takes effect. Each time a leader casts a spell during a turn, his Magic Strength is reduced by one. There are also counter spells which a player can cast to negate any hostile spells. Magical devices have special effects, ranging from teleporting a character to commanding legions of the undead.

At the end of 14 turns, players count the number of hexes they control to see who won.

Sounds great, and it is. But there are cumbersome aspects that become annoying. As a unit moves through terrain it suffers attrition, the amount of which depends on the type of terrain traversed. So each terrain type has an attrition cost. Every time you move you must add up the total cost and roll on the attrition table to see the cost in lost units. *Every time you move.* As you might imagine, it slows the game down mightily.

Then there's the combat rules. The explanation for figuring out combat results is incredibly oblique, but in the end it turns out to be a simple combat ratio. Some editorial work here could have helped.

Some improvements that could be made? Well, put the magic spells on a player-aid card indicating the appropriate runes and leaders. Have some introductory, "skirmish" scenarios to gradually introduce magic spells and items, much like Avalon Hill's *Dragon Pass.* Include a card for keeping track of the number of kingdoms under each players control.

The Dark Emperor may be a mean dude, and one you'll want to tangle with. But the game, well, that could have been a bit more friendly. ●

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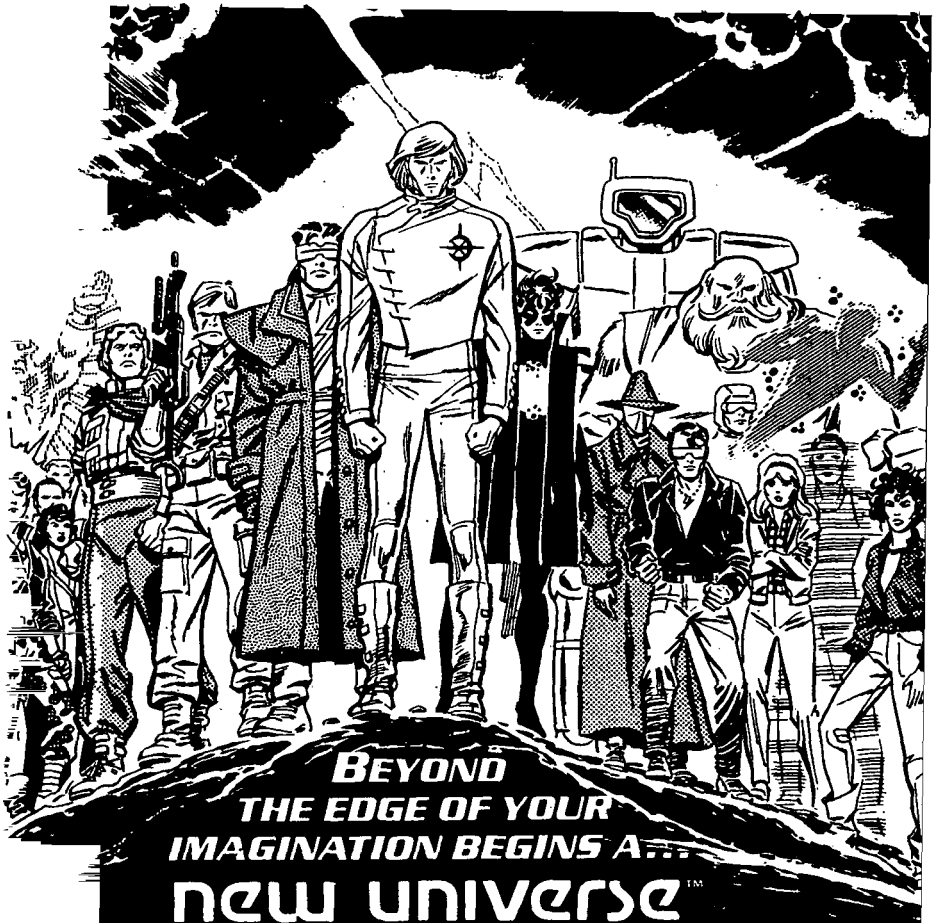

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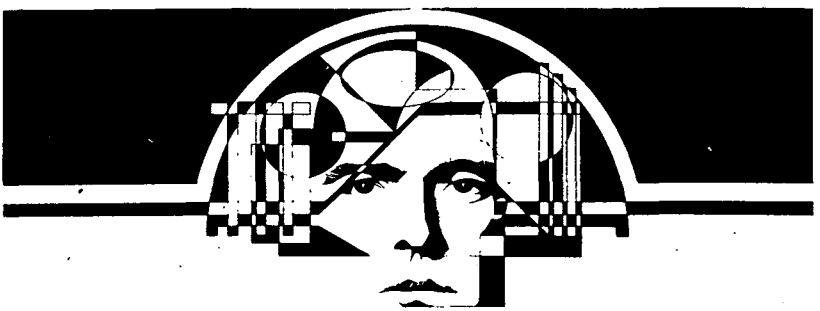
RENDRAG NITRAM

TIME-REVERSED WORLDS



One of the monumental astronomical discoveries of the twenty-first century was made by Professor Alexander Graham Cracker, the noted British astrophysicist. Using advanced instrumentation attached to a radio telescope on a space station, he was the first to establish that half the galaxies in the universe are made of antimatter. Moreover, he found that in all those galaxies the direction of time is opposite to that of our Milky Way galaxy.

If there are sentient beings in these time-reversed galaxies, of course time for them seems to go the usual way. To them, it is *our* arrow of time that is reversed. The situation is analogous to the two worlds on opposite sides of the mirror in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*.

It was generally agreed among physicists that communication between the inhabitants of two worlds, each with a different time direction, would be impossible. Professor Cracker thought otherwise.

"What are you typing, Alex?" asked Ada Loveface, the professor's attractive research assistant.

"It's a paper on communication between time-reversed worlds," Cracker replied. "My computer search at the library of the British Museum turned up a fascinating paper by the Scottish philosopher Murray MacBeath. It appeared in a philosophical journal called *Synthese* more than fifty years ago. [Volume 56, 1983, pages 27-46.] In his paper MacBeath outlined a simple way that such communication could take place."

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"That's ridiculous," said Ada. "How does MacBeath's scheme work?"

Cracker took his hands off the keyboard of his laser word processor and swiveled his chair around. "To simplify our thought experiment, let's assume the two worlds are alike in all respects except their time direction. Inhabitants speak the same language. Their days are the same time intervals. Imagine also that there is a large screen at the interface between the two worlds on which messges can instantaneously be placed and read by either side."

Ada reflected for a minute. "Fair enough. I know you have to make wild assumptions in most thought experiments, but I can't see anything conceptually impossible in what you propose."

Cracker nodded. "I now program my computer on Day 1 to flash this message on the screen." He pressed a button to call up the text on the monitor. The message began:

PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS. BUT DON'T PUT YOUR REPLY ON THE SCREEN UNTIL 99 DAYS FROM NOW, YOUR TIME. WHEN YOU REPLY, ASK QUESTIONS OF YOUR OWN.

Ada looked puzzled.

"Here's the clever idea behind the plan," Cracker went on. "I set my computer to send the message on my Day 100."

Ada had a mind as quick as she was pretty. "I can see what's coming. Your correspondent, going the other way in time, sees your message 100 days *before* your Day 1. He delays his reply until *his* Day 99, which is *your* Day 2. So on your Day 2 you get a reply to the message your computer will send on your Day 100."

"Precisely," said Cracker, rubbing his hands and smiling. "And we can keep sending messages back and forth in see-saw fashion. I program my reply to go on the screen 98 days in *my* future. He programs his next reply to go on the screen 97 days in *his* future. I see it on my Day 3. We can keep sending questions and answers back and forth until the middle of the time period, after which an exchange becomes impossible. Of course there's no need to limit the conversation to 100 days. It can be 100 years, or as long as we want."

A slow grin spread over Ada's face. "Unfortunately, Alex, the scheme has a whopping logical flaw. It can't possibly work."

After Ada explained the flaw, Professor Cracker sighed, slapped his forehead, and erased from the computer everything he had written.

What flaw did Ada have in mind?

Answer the find you'll 127 page on.

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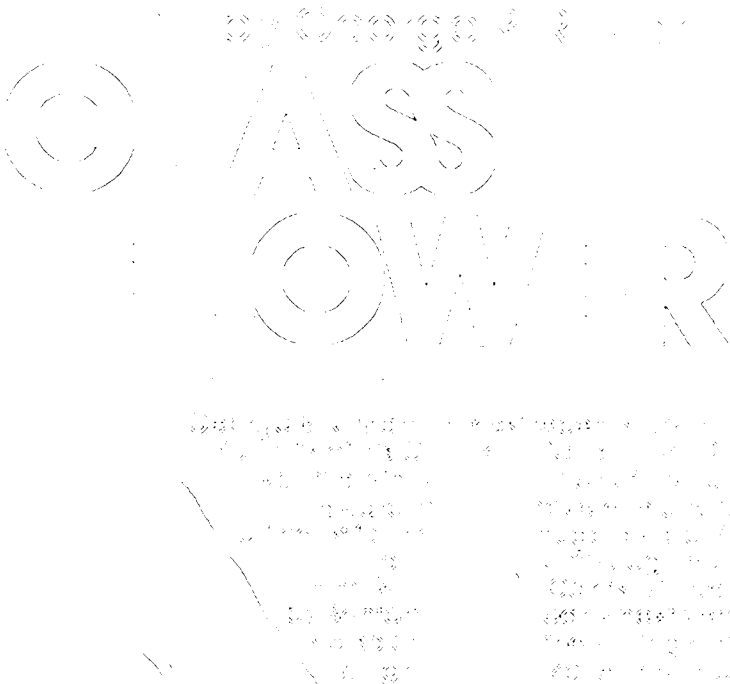

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Once, when I was just a girl in the first flush of my true youth, a young boy gave me a glass flower as a token of his love.

He was a rare and precious boy, though I confess that I have long forgotten his name. So too was the flower he gave me. On the steel and plastic worlds where I have spent my lives, the ancient glassblower's art is lost and forgotten, but the unknown artisan who had fashioned my flower remembered it well. My flower has a long and delicate stem, curved and graceful, all of fine thin glass, and from that frail support the bloom explodes, as large as my fist, impossibly exact. Every detail is there, caught, frozen in crystal for eternity; petals large and small crowding each other, bursting from the center of the blossom in a slow transparent riot, surrounded by a crown of six wide drooping leaves, each with its tracery of veins intact, each unique. It was as if an alchemist had been wandering through a garden one day, and in a moment of idle play had transmuted an especially large and beautiful flower into glass.

All that it lacks is life.

I kept that flower with me for near two hundred years, long after I had left the boy who gave it to me and the world where he had done the giving. Through all the varied chapters of my lives, the glass flower was always close at hand. It amused me to keep it in a vase of polished wood, and set it near a window. Sometimes the leaves and petals would catch the sun and flash brilliantly for an incandescent instant; at other times they would filter and fracture the light, scattering blurred rainbows on my floor. Often toward dusk, when the world was dimmer, the flower would seem to fade entirely from view, and I might sit staring at an empty vase. Yet, when the morning came, the flower would be back again. It never failed me.

The glass flower was terribly fragile, but no harm ever came to it. I cared for it well; better, perhaps, than I have ever cared for anything, or anyone. It outlasted a dozen lovers, more than a dozen professions, and more worlds and friends than I can name. It was with me in my youth on Ash and Erikan and Shamdizar, and later on Rogue's Hope and Vagabond, and still later when I had grown old on Dam Tullian and Lilith and Gulliver. And when I finally left human space entirely, put all my lives and all the worlds of men behind me, and grew young again, the glass flower was still at my side.

And, at very long last, in my castle built on stilts, in my house of pain and rebirth where the game of mind is played, amid the swamps and stinks of Croan'dhenni, far from all humanity save those few lost souls who seek us out—it was there, too, my glass flower.

On the day Kleronomas arrived.

"Joachim Kleronomas," I said.

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"Yes."

There are cyborgs and then there are cyborgs. So many worlds, so many different cultures, so many sets of values and levels of technologies. Some cyberjacks are half organic, some more, some less; some sport only a single metal hand, the rest of their cyberhalves cleverly concealed beneath the flesh. Some cyborgs wear synthaflesh that is indistinguishable from human skin, though that is no great feat, given the variety of skin to be seen among the thousand worlds. Some hide the metal and flaunt the flesh; with others the reverse is true.

The man who called himself Kleronomas had no flesh to hide or flaunt. A cyborg he called himself, and a cyborg he was in the legends that had grown up around his name, but as he stood before me, he seemed more a robot, insufficiently organic to pass even as android.

He was naked, if a thing of metal and plastic can be naked. His chest was jet; some shining black alloy or smooth plastic, I could not tell. His arms and legs were transparent plasteel. Beneath that false skin, I could see the dark metal of his duralloy bones, the power-bars and flexors that were muscles and tendons, the micromotors and sensing computers, the intricate pattern of lights racing up and down his superconductive neurosystem. His fingers were steel. On his right hand, long silver claws sprang rakishly from his knuckles when he made a fist.

He was looking at me. His eyes were crystalline lenses set in metal sockets, moving back and forth in some green translucent gel. They had no visible pupils; behind each implacable crimson iris burned a dim light that gave his stare an ominous red glow. "Am I that fascinating?" he asked me. His voice was surprisingly natural; deep and resonant, with no metallic echoes to corrode the humanity of his inflections

"Kleronomas," I said. "Your name is fascinating, certainly. A very long time ago, there was another man of that name, a cyborg, a legend. You know that, of course. He of the Kleronomas Survey. The founder of the Academy of Human Knowledge on Avalon. Your ancestor? Perhaps metal runs in your family."

"No," said the cyborg. "Myself. I am Joachim Kleronomas."

I smiled for him. "And I'm Jesus Christ. Would you care to meet my Apostles?"

"You doubt me, Wisdom?"

"Kleronomas died on Avalon a thousand years ago."

"No," he said. "He stands before you now."

"Cyborg," I said, "this is Croan'dhenni. You would not have come here unless you sought rebirth, unless you sought to win new life in the game of mind. So be warned. In the game of mind, your lies will be stripped away from you. Your flesh and your metal and your illusions, we will take them all, and in the end there will be only you, more naked and

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alone than you can ever imagine. So do not waste my time. It is the most precious thing I have, time. It is the most precious thing any of us have. Who are you, cyborg?"

"Kleronomas," he said. Was there a mocking note in his voice? I could not tell. His face was not built for smiling. "Do you have a name?" he asked me.

"Several," I said.

"Which do you use?"

"My players call me Wisdom."

"That is a title, not a name," he said.

I smiled. "You are traveled, then. Like the real Kleronomas. Good. My birth name was Cyrain. I suppose, of all my names, I am most used to that one. I wore it for the first fifty years of my life, until I came to Dam Tullian and studied to be a Wisdom and took a new name with the title."

"Cyrain," he repeated. "That alone?"

"Yes."

"On what world were you born, then?"

"Ash."

"Cyrain of Ash," he said. "How old are you?"

"In standard years?"

"Of course."

I shrugged. "Close to two hundred. I've lost count."

"You look like a child, like a girl close to puberty, no more."

"I am older than my body," I said.

"As am I," he said. "The curse of the cyborg, Wisdom, is that parts can be replaced."

"Then you're immortal?" I challenged him.

"In one crude sense, yes."

"Interesting," I said. "Contradictory. You come here to me, to Croan'dhenni and its Artifact, to the game of mind. Why? This is a place where the dying come, cyborg, in hopes of winning life. We don't get many immortals."

"I seek a different prize," the cyborg said.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"Death," he told me. "Life. Death. Life."

"Two different things," I said. "Opposites. Enemies."

"No," said the cyborg. "They are the same."

Six hundred standard years ago, a creature known in legend as The White landed among the Croan'dhenni in the first starship they had ever seen. If the descriptions in Croan'dhic folklore can be trusted, then The White was of no race I have ever encountered, nor heard of, though I am widely traveled. This does not surprise me. The manrealm and its thou-

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sand worlds (perhaps there are twice that number, perhaps less, but who can keep count?), the scattered empires of Fyndii and Damoosh and G'vhern and N'or Talush, and all the other sentients who are known to us or rumored of, all this together, all those lands and stars and lives colored by passion and blood and history, sprawling proudly across the light-years, across the black gulfs that only the *volcryn* ever truly know, all of this, all of our little universe . . . it is only an island of light surrounded by a vastly greater area of greyness and myth that fades ultimately into the black of ignorance. And *this* only in one small galaxy, whose uttermost reaches we shall never know, should we endure a billion years. Ultimately, the sheer size of things will defeat us, however we may strive or scream; that truth I am sure of.

But I do not defeat easily. That is my pride, my last and only pride; it is not much to face the darkness with, but it is something. When the end comes, I will meet it raging.

The White was like me in that. It was a frog from a pond beyond ours, a place lost in the grey where our little lights have not yet shone on the dark waters. Whatever sort of creature it might have been, whatever burdens of history and evolution it carried in its genes, it was nonetheless my kin. Both of us were angry mayflies, moving restlessly from star to star because we, alone among our fellows, knew how short our day. Both of us found a destiny of sorts in these swamps of Croan'dhenni.

The White came utterly alone to this place, set down its little starship (I have seen the remains: a toy, that ship, a trinket, but with lines that are utterly alien to me, and deliciously chilling), and, exploring, found something.

Something older than itself, and stranger.

The Artifact.

Whatever strange instruments it had, whatever secret alien knowledge it possessed, whatever instinct bid it enter; all lost now, and none of it matters. The White knew, knew something the native sentients had never guessed, knew the purpose of the Artifact, knew how it might be activated. For the first time in—a thousand years? A million? For the first time in a long while, the game of mind was played. And the White changed, emerged from the Artifact as something else, as the first. The first mindlord. The first master of life and death. The first painlord. The first lifelord. The titles are born, worn, discarded, forgotten, and none of them matter.

Whatever I am, the White was the first.

Had the cyborg asked to meet my Apostles, I would not have disappointed him. I gathered them when he left me. "The new player," I told

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them, "calls himself Kleronomas. I want to know who he is, what he is, and what he hopes to gain. Find out for me."

I could feel their greed and fear. The Apostles are a useful tool, but loyalty is not for them. I have gathered to me twelve Judas Iscariots, each of them hungry for that kiss.

"I'll have a full scan worked up," suggested Doctor Lyman, pale weak eyes considering me, flatterer's smile trembling.

"Will he consent to an interface?" asked Deish Green-9, my own cyberjack. His right hand, sunburned red-black flesh, was balled into a fist; his left was a silver ball that cracked open to exude a nest of writhing metallic tendrils. Beneath his heavy beetling brow, where he should have had eyes, a seamless strip of mirrorglass was set into his skull. He had chromed his teeth. His smile was very bright.

"We'll find out," I said.

Sebastian Cayle floated in his tank, a twisted embryo with a massive monstrous head, flippers moving vaguely, huge blind eyes regarding me through turgid greenish fluids as bubbles rose all around his pale naked flesh. *He is a Liar* came the whisper in my head. *I will find the truth for you, Wisdom.*

"Good," I told him.

Tr'k'nn'r, my Fyndii mindmute, sang to me in a high shrill voice at the edge of human hearing. He loomed above them all like a stickman in a child's crude drawing, a stickman three meters tall, excessively jointed, bending in all the wrong places at all the wrong angles, assembled of old bones turned gray as ash by some ancient fire. But the crystalline eyes beneath his brow ridge were fervid as he sang, and fragrant black fluids ran from the bottom of his lipless vertical mouth. His song was of pain and screaming and nerves set afire, of secrets revealed, of truth dragged steaming and raw from all its hidden crevasses.

"No," I said to him. "He is a cyborg. If he feels pain it is only because he wills it. He would shut down his receptors and turn you off, loneling, and your song would turn to silence."

The neurowhore Shayalla Loethen smiled with resignation. "Then there's nothing for me to work on either, Wisdom?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "He has no obvious genitalia, but if there's anything organic left inside him, his pleasure centers might be intact. He claims to have been male. The instincts might still be viable. Find out."

She nodded. Her body was soft and white as snow, and sometimes cold, when she wanted cold, and sometimes white hot, when that was her desire. Those lips that curled upwards now with anticipation were crimson and alive. The garments that swirled around her changed shape and

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color even as I watched, and sparks began to play along her fingertips, arcing across her long, painted nails.

"Drugs?" asked Braje, biomed, genegineer, poisoner. She sat thinking, chewing some tranq of her own devising, her swollen body as damp and soft as the swamps outside. "Truetell? Agonine? Esperon?"

"I doubt it," I said.

"Disease," she offered. "Manthrax or gangrene. The slow plague, and we've got the cure?" She giggled.

"No," I said curtly.

And the rest, and on and on. They all had their suggestions, their ways of finding out things I wanted to know, of making themselves useful to me, of earning my gratitude. Such are my Apostles. I listened to them, let myself be carried along by the babble of voices, weighed, considered, handed out orders, and finally I sent them all away, all but one.

Khar Dorian will be the one to kiss me when that day finally comes. I do not have to be a Wisdom to know that truth.

The rest of them want something of me. When they get it, they will be gone. Khar got his desire long ago, and still he comes back and back and back, to my world and my bed. It is not love of me that brings him back, nor the beauty of the young body I wear, nor anything as simple as the riches he earns. He has grander things in mind.

"He rode with you," I said. "All the way from Lilith. Who is he?"

"A player," Dorian said, grinning at me crookedly, taunting me. He is breathtakingly beautiful. Lean and hard and well fit, with the arrogance and rough-hewn masculine sexuality of a thirty-year-old, flush with health and power and hormones. His hair is blond and long and unkempt. His jaw is clean and strong, his nose straight and unbroken, his eyes a hale, vibrant blue. But there is something old living behind those eyes, something old and cynical and sinister.

"Dorian," I warned him, "don't try games with me. He is more than just a player. Who is he?"

Khar Dorian got up, stretched lazily, yawned, grinned. "Who he says he is," my slaver told me. "Kleronomas."

Morality is a closely knit garment that binds tightly when it binds at all, but the vastnesses that lie between the stars are prone to unraveling it, to plucking it apart into so many loose threads, each brightly colored, but forming no discernible pattern. The fashionable Vagabonder is a rustic spectacular on Cathaday, the Ymirian swelters on Vess, the Vessman freezes on Ymir, and the shifting lights the Fellanei wear instead of cloth provoke rape, riot, and murder on half a dozen worlds. So it is with morals. Good is no more constant than the cut of a lapel; the decision

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Norman Spinrad

Child of Fortune

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to take a sentient life weighs no more heavily than the decision to bare one's breasts, or hide them.

There are worlds on which I am a monster. I stopped caring a long time ago. I came to Croan'dhenni with my own fashion sense, and no concern for the aesthetic judgments of others.

Khar Dorian calls himself a slaver, and points out to me that we do, indeed, deal in human flesh. He can call himself what he likes. I am no slaver; the charge offends me. A slaver sells his clients into bondage and servitude, deprives them of freedom, mobility, and time, all precious commodities. I do no such thing. I am only a thief. Khar and his underlings bring them to me from the swollen cities of Lilith, from the harsh mountains and cold wastes of Dam Tullian, from rotting tenements along the canals of Vess, from spaceport bars on Fellanora and Cymeranth and Shrike, from wherever he can find them, he takes them and brings them to me, and I steal from them and set them free.

A lot of them refuse to go.

They cluster outside my castle walls in the city they have built, toss gifts to me as I pass, call out my name, beg favors of me. I have left them freedom, mobility, and time, and they squander it all in futility, hoping to win back the one thing I have stolen.

I steal their bodies, but they lose their souls themselves.

And perhaps I am unduly harsh to call myself a thief. These victims Khar brings me are unwilling players in the game of mind, but no less players for all that. Others pay so very dearly and risk so very much for the same privilege. Some we call players and some we call prizes, but when the pain comes and the game of mind begins, we are all the same, all naked and alone without riches or health or status, armed with only the strength that lies within us. Win or lose, live or die, it is up to us and us alone.

I give them a chance. A few have even won. Very few, true, but how many thieves give their victims any chance at all?

The Steel Angels, whose worlds lie far from Croan'dhenni on the other side of human space, teach their children that strength is the only virtue and weakness the only sin, and preach that the truth of their faith is written large on the universe itself. It is a difficult point to argue. By their creed, I have every moral right to the bodies I take, because I am stronger and therefore better and more holy than those born to that flesh.

The little girl born in my present body was not a Steel Angel, unfortunately.

"And baby makes three," I said, "even if baby is made of metal and plastic and names himself a legend."

"Eh?" Rannar looked at me blankly. He is not as widely traveled as

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me, and the reference, something I have dredged up from my forgotten youth on some world he's never walked, escaped him entirely. His long, sour face wore a look of patient bafflement.

"We have three players now," I told him carefully. "We can play the game of mind."

That much Rannar understood. "Ah yes, of course. I'll see to it at once, Wisdom."

Craimur Delhune was the first. An ancient thing, almost as old as me, though he had done all of his living in the same small body. No wonder it was worn out. He was hairless and shrivelled, a wheezing half-blind travesty, his flesh full of alloplas and metal implants that labored day and night just to keep him alive. It was not something they could do much longer, but Craimur Delhune had not had enough living yet, and so he had come to Croan'dhenni to pay for the flesh and begin all over again. He had been waiting nearly half a standard year.

Rieseen Jay was a stranger case. She was under fifty and in decent health, though her flesh bore its own scars. Rieseen was jaded. She had sampled every pleasure Lilith offered, and Lilith offers a good many pleasures. She had tasted every food, flowed with every drug, sexed with males, females, aliens, and animals, risked her life skiing the glaciers, baiting pit-dragons, fighting in the soar-wars for the delectation of holofans everywhere. She thought a new body would be just the thing to add spice to life. Maybe a male body, she thought, or an alien's offcolor flesh. We get a few like her.

And Joachim Kleronomas made three.

In the game of mind, there are seats for seven. Three players, three prizes, and me.

Rannar offered me a thick portfolio, full of photographs and reports on the prizes newly arrived on Khar Dorian's ships, on the *Bright Phoenix* and the *Second Chance* and the *New Deal* and the *Fleshpot* (Khar has always had a certain black sense of humor). The major-domo hovered at my elbow, solicitous and helpful, as I turned the pages and made my selections. "She's delicious," he said once, at a picture of a slim Vessgirl with frightened yellow eyes that hinted at a hybrid gene-mix. "Very strong and healthy, that one," he said later, as I considered a hugely muscled youth with green eyes and waist-long braided black hair. I ignored him. I always ignore him.

"Him," I said, taking out the file of a boy as slender as a stiletto, his ruddy skin covered with tattoos. Khar had purchased him from the authorities on Shrike, where he'd been convicted of killing another sixteen-year-old. On most worlds Khar Dorian, the infamous free trader, smuggler, raider, and slaver, had a name synonymous with evil; parents

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threatened their children with him. On Shrike he was a solid citizen who did the community great service by buying up the garbage in the prisons.

"Her," I said, setting aside a second photograph, of a pudgy young woman of about thirty standard whose wide green eyes betrayed a certain vacancy. From Cymeranth, her file said. Khar had dropped one of his raiders into a coldsleep facility for the mentally damaged and helped himself to some young, healthy, attractive bodies. This one was soft and fat, but that would change once an active mind wore the flesh again. The original owner had sucked up too much dreamdust.

"And it," I said. The third file was that of a g'vhern hatchling, a grim-looking individual with fierce magenta eyecrests and huge, leathery batwings that glistened with iridescent oils. It was for Rieseen Jay, who thought she might like to try a nonhuman body. If she could win it.

"Very good, Wisdom," said Rannar approvingly. He was always approving. When he had come to Croan'dhenni, his body was grotesque; he'd been caught in bed with the daughter of his employer, a V'lador knight of the blood, and the punishment was extensive ritual mutilation. He did not have the price of a game. But I'd had two players waiting for almost a year, one of whom was dying of manthrax, so when Rannar offered me ten years of faithful service to make up the difference, I accepted.

Sometimes I had my regrets. I could feel his eyes on my body, could sense his mind stripping away the soft armor of my clothes to fasten, leechlike, on my small, budding breasts. The girl he'd been found with was not much younger than the flesh I now wore.

My castle is built of obsidian.

North of here, far north, in the smoky polar wastelands where eternal fires burn against a purple sky, the black volcanic glass lies upon the ground like common stone. It took thousands of Croan'dhic miners nine standard years to find enough for my purposes and drag it all back to the swamps, over all those barren kilometers. It took hundreds of artisans another six years to cut and polish it and fit it all together into the dark shimmering mosaic that is my home. I judged the effort worthwhile.

My castle stands on four great jagged pillars high up above the smells and damp of the Croan'dhic swampland, ablaze with colored lights whose ghosts glimmer within the black glass. My castle gleams; a thing of beauty, austere and forbidding, supreme and apart from the shantytown that has grown up around it, where the losers and discards and dispossessed huddle hopelessly in floating reed-huts, festering treehouses, and hovels on half-rotted wooden stilts. The obsidian appeals to my aesthetic sense, and I find its symbolism appropriate to this house of pain and rebirth. Life is born in the heat of sexual passion as obsidian is born in

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volcanic fire. The clean truth of light can sometimes flow through its blackness, beauty seen dimly through darkness, and like life, it is terribly fragile, with edges that can be dangerously sharp.

Inside my castle are rooms on rooms, some paneled over with fragrant native woods and covered with furs and thick carpets, some left bare and black, ceremonial chambers where dark reflections move through glass walls and footsteps click brittle against glass floors. In the center, at the very apex, rises an onion-shaped obsidian tower, braced by steel. Within the dome, a single chamber.

I ordered the castle built, replacing an older and much shabbier structure, and to that single tower chamber, I caused the Artifact to be moved.

It is there that the game of mind is played.

My own suite is at the base of the tower. The reasons for that were symbolic as well. None achieve rebirth without first passing through me.

I was breaking fast in bed, on butterfruit and raw fish and strong black coffee, with Khar Dorian stretched out languid and insolent beside me, when my scholar Apostle, Alta-k-Nahr, came to me with her report.

She stood at the foot of the bed, her back twisted like a great question mark by her disease, her long features permanently set in a grimace of distaste, her skin shot through with swollen veins like great blue worms, and she told me of her researches on the historical Kleronomas in a voice unnecessarily soft.

"His full name was Joachim Charle Kleronomas," she said, "and he was native to New Alexandria, a first generation colony less than seventy light years from Old Earth. Records of his birthdate, childhood, and adolescence are fragmentary and contradictory. The most popular legends indicate his mother was a high-ranking officer on a warship of the 13th Human Fleet, under Stephen Cobalt Northstar, and that Kleronomas met her only twice. He was gestated in a hireling host-mother and reared by his father, a minor scholar at a library on New Alexandria. My opinion is that this tale of his origin explains, a bit too neatly, how Kleronomas came to combine both the scholastic and martial traditions; therefore I question its reliability.

"More certain is the fact that he joined the military at a very early age, in those last days of the Thousand Years War. He served initially as systems tech on a screamer-class raider with the 17th Human Fleet, distinguished himself in deepspace actions off El Dorado and Arturius and in the raids on Hrag Druun, after which he was promoted to cadet and given command training. By the time the 17th was shifted from its original base on Fenris to a minor sector capital called Avalon, Kleronomas had earned further distinction, and was the third-in-command of the dropship *Hannibal*. But in the raids on Hruun-Fourteen, the *Han-*

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nibal took heavy damage from Hrangan defenders, and was finally abandoned. The screamer in which Kleronomas escaped was disabled by enemy fire and crashed planetside, killing everyone aboard. He was the sole survivor. Another screamer picked up what was left of him, but he was so near dead and horribly maimed that they shoved him into cryostorage at once. He was taken back to Avalon, but resources were few and demands many, and they had no time to bother reviving him. They kept him under for years.

"Meanwhile, the Collapse was in progress. It had been in progress all of his lifetime, actually, but communications across the width of the old Federal Empire were so slow that no one knew it. But a single decade saw the revolt on Thor, the total disintegration of the 15th Human Fleet, and Old Earth's attempt to remove Stephen Cobalt Northstar from command of the 13th, which led inevitably to the secession of Newholme and most of the other first generation colonies, to Northstar's obliteration of Wellington, to civil war, breakaway colonies, lost worlds, the fourth great expansion, the hellfleet legend, and ultimately the sealing of Old Earth and the effective cessation of commercial starflight for a generation. Longer than that, far far longer, on some more remote worlds, many of which devolved to near savagery or developed odd variant cultures.

"Out on the front, Avalon had its own first-hand experience of the Collapse when Rajeen Tober, commanding the 17th Fleet, refused to submit to the civil authorities and took his ships deep into the Tempter's Veil to found his own personal empire safe from both Hrangan and human retaliation. The departure of the 17th left Avalon essentially defenseless. The only warships still in the sector were the ancient hulks of the 5th Human Fleet, which had last seen combat nearly seven centuries earlier, when Avalon was a very distant strikebase against the Hrangans. About a dozen capital-class ships and thirty-odd smaller craft of the 5th remained in orbit around Avalon, most needing extensive repairs, all functionally obsolete. But they were the only defenders left to a frightened world, so Avalon determined to refit and restore them. To crew these museum pieces, Avalon turned to its cryonic wards, and began to thaw every combat veteran on hand, including Joachim Kleronomas. The damage he had sustained was extensive, but Avalon needed every last body. Kleronomas returned more machine than man. A cyborg."

I leaned forward to interrupt Alta's recitation. "Are there any pictures of him as he was then?" I asked her.

"Yes. Both before and after. Kleronomas was a big man, with blue-black skin, a heavy outthrust jaw, gray eyes, long pure white hair. After the operation, the jaw and the bottom half of his face were gone entirely, replaced with seamless metal. No mouth, no nose. He took nourishment intravenously. One eye was lost, replaced by a crystal sensor with IR/UV

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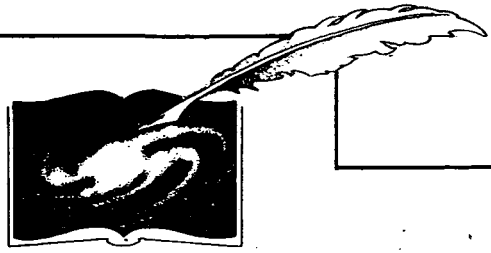

About L. RON HUBBARD's

Writers of the Future Contest

by Algis Budrys

The Writers of the Future contest substantially rewards at least twelve talented new speculative fiction writers each year. With no strings, every three months it confers prizes of $500, $750 and $1,000 for short stories or novelettes. In addition, there's an annual Master Prize of $4,000. All awards are symbolized by trophies or framed certificates, so there's something for the mantelpiece too.

There's also a Writers of the Future anthology, which I edit. (There was one last year, and there's another one just out as you read this.) It offers top rates for limited rights in the stories. These payments are in addition to any contest winnings. The anthology is distributed through top paperback book retailers everywhere, and is kept in print and on sale continually. All that's required to win or to be a finalist is a good new story, any kind of fantasy or science fiction, no more than 17,000 words long, by writers whose published fiction has been no more than three short stories or one novelette. Entry is free.

The contest deadlines in 1986 are March 31, June 30, and September 30, and there are First, Second and Third prizes for each three-month quarter. At the end of our year, a separate panel of judges awards a Master Prize to the best of the four quarterly winners. So one person will win a total of $5,000. Judging panels include or have included Gregory Benford, Stephen Goldin, Frank Herbert, Anne McCaffrey, C.L. Moore, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny, as well as me. Matters are administered so that the judges are totally independent and have the final say.

It seems hardly necessary to embellish the above facts with any enthusiastic adjectives. This contest was created and sponsored by L. Ron Hubbard and the project will continue in 1986 and try to do some realistic good for people whose talent earns them this consideration. For complete entry rules, and answers to any questions you might have, write to the address given below:

Don't Delay! Send Your Entry To:

Writers of the Future Contest
2210 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 343
Santa Monica, CA 90403

Or, you can find the rules—and examples of winning stories, plus informative essays by some of the judges—in either of the Writers of the Future anthologies. They're original paperbacks and cost $3.95 each.

Good luck.

—Algis Budrys

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range. His right arm and the entire right half of his chest was cybered, steel plate, duralloy mesh, plastic. A third of his inner organs were synthetic. And they gave him a jack, of course, and built in a small computer. From the beginning, Kleronomas disdained cosmetics; he looked exactly like what he was."

I smiled. "But what he was, that was still a good deal more fleshy than our new guest?"

"True," said my scholar. "The rest of the history is more well known. There weren't many officers among the revived. Kleronomas was given his own command, a small courier-class ship. He served for a decade, pursuing the scholarly studies in history and anthropology that were his private passion, and rising higher and higher in the ranks while Avalon waited for ships that never came and built more and more ships of its own. There were no trades, no raids; the interregnum had come.

"Finally, a bolder civil leadership decided to risk a few of its ships and find out how the rest of human civilization had fared. Six of the ancient 5th Fleet dreadnaughts were refitted as science survey craft and sent out. Kleronomas was given command of one of them. Of those survey ships, two were lost on their missions, and three others returned within two years carrying minimal information on a handful of the closest systems, prompting the Avalonians to reinitiate starflight on a very limited local basis. Kleronomas was thought lost.

"He was not lost. When the small, limited goals of the original survey were completed, he decided to continue rather than return to Avalon. He became obsessed with the next star, and the next after that, and the next after that. He took his ship on and on. There were mutinies, desertions, dangers to be faced and fought, and Kleronomas dealt with them all. As a cyborg, he was immensely long-lived. The legends say he became ever more metallic as the voyage went on, and on Eris discovered the matrix crystal and expanded his intellectual abilities by orders of magnitude through the addition of the first crystal-matrix computer. That particular story fits his character; he was obsessed not only with the acquisition of knowledge, but with its retention. Altered so, he would never forget.

"When he finally returned to Avalon, more than a hundred standard years had passed. Of the men and women who had left Avalon with him, Kleronomas alone survived; his ship was manned by the descendants of its original crew, plus those recruits he had gathered on the worlds he visited. But he had surveyed four hundred and forty-nine planets, and more asteroids, comets, and satellites than anyone would have dreamed possible. The information he brought back became the foundation upon which the Academy of Human Knowledge was built, and the crystal samples, incorporated into existing systems, became the medium in which that knowledge was stored, eventually evolving into the academy's

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vast Artificial Intelligences and the fabled crystal towers of Avalon. The resumption of large-scale starflight soon thereafter was the real end of the interregnum. Kleronomas himself served as the first academy administrator until his death, which supposedly came on Avalon in ai-42, that is, forty-two standard years after the day of his return."

I laughed. "Excellent," I told Alta-k-Nahr. "He's a fraud, then. Dead at least seven hundred years." I looked at Khar Dorian, whose long fine hair was spread across the pillow as he nibbled on a heel of mead bread. "You are slipping, Khar. He fooled you."

Khar swallowed, grinned. "Whatever you say, Wisdom," he said, in a tone that told me he was anything but contrite. "Shall I kill him for you?"

"No," I said. "He is a player. In the game of mind, there are no imposters. Let him play. Let him play."

Days later, when the game had been scheduled, I called the cyborg to me. I saw him in my office, a large room with deep scarlet carpeting, where my glass flower sits by the great window that overlooks my battlements and the swamp town below.

His face was without expression. Of course, of course. "You summoned me, Cyrain of Ash."

"The game is set," I told him. "Four days from today."

"I am pleased," he said.

"Would you like to see the prizes?" I offered him the files; the boy, the girl, the hatchling.

He glanced at them briefly, without interest.

"I am told," I said to him, "that you have spent a lot of time wandering these past days. Inside my castle, and outside in the town and the swamps."

"True," he said. "I do not sleep. Knowledge is my diversion, my addiction. I was curious to learn what sort of place this was."

Smiling, I said, "And what sort of place is it, cyborg?"

He could not smile, nor frown. His tone was even, polite. "A vile place," he said. "A place of despair and degradation."

"A place of eternal, undying hope," I said.

"A place of sickness, of the body and the soul."

"A place where the sick grow well," I countered.

"And where the well grow sick," the cyborg said. "A place of death."

"A place of life," I said. "Isn't that why you came? For life?"

"And death," he said. "I have told you, they are the same."

I leaned forward. "And I have told you, they are very different. You make harsh judgments, cyborg. Rigidity is to be expected in a machine, but this fine, precious moral sensitivity is not."

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"Only my body is machine," he said.

I picked up his file. "That is not my understanding," I said. "Where is your morality in regard to lying? Especially so transparent a lie?" I opened the file flat on my desk. "I've had a few interesting reports from my Apostles. You've been extraordinarily cooperative."

"If you wish to play the game of mind, you cannot offend the painlord," he said.

I smiled. "I'm not as easily offended as you might think." I searched through the reports. "Doctor Lyman did a full scan on you. He finds you an ingenious construct. And made entirely of plastic and metal. There is nothing organic left inside you, cyborg. Or should I call you robot? Can computers play the game of mind, I wonder? We will certainly find out. You have three of them, I see. A small one in what should be your brain case that attends to motor functions, sensory input, and internal monitoring, a much larger library unit occupying most of your lower torso, and a crystral matrix in your chest." I looked up. "Your heart, cyborg?"

"My mind," he said. "Ask your Doctor Lyman, and he will tell of other cases like mine. What is a human mind? Memories. Memories are data. Character, personality, individual volition. Those are programming. It is possible to imprint the whole of a human mind upon a crystal matrix computer."

"And trap the soul in the crystal?" I said. "Do you believe in souls?"

"Do you?" he asked.

"I must. I am mistress of the game of mind. It would seem to be required of me." I turned to the other reports my Apostles had assembled on this construct who called himself Kleronomas. "Deish Green-9 interfaced with you. He says you have a system of incredible sophistication, that the speed of your circuitry greatly exceeds human thought, that your library contains far more accessible information than any single organic brain could retain even were it able to make full use of its capacity, and that the mind and memories locked within that crystal matrix are that of one Joachim Kleronomas. He swears to that."

The cyborg said nothing. Perhaps he might have smiled then, had he the capacity.

"On the other hand," I said, "my scholar Alta-k-Nahr assures me that Kleronomas is dead seven hundred years. Who am I to believe?"

"Whomever you choose," he said indifferently.

"I might hold you here and send to Avalon for confirmation," I said. I grinned. "A thirty year voyage in, thirty more years back out. Say a year to research the question. Can you wait sixty-one years to play, cyborg?"

"As long as necessary," he said.

"Shayalla says you are thoroughly asexual."

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"That capacity was lost from the day they remade me," he said. "My interest in the subject lingered for some centuries afterwards, but finally that too faded. If I choose, I have access to a full range of erotic memories of the days when I wore organic flesh. They remain as fresh as the day they were entered into my computer. Once locked in crystal, memories cannot fade, as with a human brain. They are there, waiting to be tapped. But for centuries now, I have had no inclination to recall them."

I was intrigued. "You cannot forget," I said.

"I can erase," he said. "I can choose not to remember."

"If you are among the winners in our little game of mind, you will regain your sexuality."

"I am aware of that. It will be an interesting experience. Perhaps then I will choose to tap those ancient memories."

"Yes," I said, delighted. "You'll begin to use them, and at precisely the same instant you will begin to forget them. There is a loss there, cyborg, as sharp as your gain."

"Gain and loss. Living and dying. I have told you, Cyrain, they cannot be separated."

"I don't accept that," I said. It was at issue with all I believe, all I am; his repetition of the lie annoyed me. "Braje says you cannot be affected by drugs or disease. Obvious. You could be dismantled, though. Several of my Apostles have offered to dispose of you, at my command. My aliens are especially bloodthirsty, it seems."

"I have no blood," he said. Sardonic? Or was it all the power of suggestion?

"Your lubricants might suffice," I said dryly. "Tr'k'nn'r would test your capacity for pain. AanTerg Moonscorer, my g'vhern aerialist, has offered to drop you from a great height."

"That would be an unconscionable crime by nest standards."

"Yes and no," I said. "A nestborn g'vhern would be aghast at the suggestion that flight be thus perverted. My Apostle, on the other hand, would be more aghast at the suggestion of birth control. Flapping those oily leather wings you'll find the mind of a half-sane cripple from New Rome. This is Croan'dhenni. We are not as we seem."

"So it appears."

"Jonas has offered to destroy you too, in a less dramatic but equally effective fashion. He's my largest Apostle. Deformed by runaway glands. The patron saint of advanced automatic weaponry, and my chief of security."

"Obviously you have declined these offers," the cyborg said.

I leaned back. "Obviously," I said, "though I always reserve the right to change my mind."

"I am a player," he said. "I have paid Khar Dorian, have bribed the

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Croan'dhic port-guards, have paid your major-domo and yourself. Inwards, on Lilith and Cymeranth and Shrike and other worlds where they speak of this black palace and its half-mythical mistress, they say that your players are treated with fairly."

"Wrong," I said. "I am never fair, cyborg. Sometimes I am just. When the whim takes me."

"Do you threaten all your players as you have threatened me?" he asked.

"No," I admitted. "I'm making a special exception in your case."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you're dangerous," I said, smiling. We had come to the heart of it at last. I shuffled through all my Apostolic bills, and extracted the last of them, the most important. "At least one of my Apostles you have never met, but he knows you, cyborg, knows you better than you would dream."

The cyborg said nothing.

"My pet telepath," I said. "Sebastian Cayle. He's blind and twisted and I keep him in a big jar, but he has his uses. He can probe through walls. He has stroked the crystals of your mind, friend, and tripped the binary synapses of your id. His report is a bit cryptic, but admirably terse." I slid it across the desk for the cyborg to read.

> *A haunted labyrinth of thought. The steel ghost. The truth within the lie, life in death and death in life. He will take everything from you if he can. Kill him now.*

"You are ignoring his advice," the cyborg said.

"I am," I told him.

"Why?"

"Because you're a mystery one I plan to solve when we play the game of mind. Because you're a challenge, and it has been a long time since I was challenged. Because you dare to judge me and dream of destroying me, and it has been ages since anyone found the courage to do either of those things."

Obsidian makes a dark, distorted mirror, but one that suits me. We take our reflections for granted all our lives, until the hour comes when our eyes search for the familiar features and find instead the image of a stranger. You cannot know the meaning of horror or of fascination until you take that first long gaze from a stranger's eyes, and raise an unfamiliar hand to touch the other's cheek, and feel those fingers, light and cool and afraid, brush against your skin.

I was already a stranger when I came to Croan'dhenni more than a

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century ago. I knew my face, as well I should, having worn it nearly ninety years. It was the face of a woman who was both hard and strong, with deep lines around her gray eyes from squinting into alien suns, a wide mouth not without its generosity, a nose once broken that had not healed straight, short brown hair in perpetual disarray. A comfortable face, and one that I had a certain affection for. But I lost it somewhere, perhaps during my years on Gulliver, lost it when I was too busy to notice. By the time I reached Lilith, the first stranger had begun to haunt my mirrors. She was an old woman, old and wrinkled. Her eyes were grey and rheumy and starting to dim, her hair white and thin, with patches of pinkish scalp showing through; the edge of her mouth trembled, there were broken capillaries in her nose, and beneath her chin lay several folds of soft gray flesh like the wattles of a hen. Her skin was soft and loose, where mine had always been taut and flush with health, and there was another thing, a thing you could not see in the mirror—a smell of sickness that enveloped her like the cheap perfume of an aged courtesan, a pheromone for death.

I did not know her, this old sick thing, nor did I cherish her company. They say that age and sickness come slowly on worlds like Avalon and Newholme and Prometheus; legends claim death no longer comes at all on Old Earth behind its shining walls. But Avalon and Newholme and Prometheus were far away, and Old Earth is sealed and lost to us, and I was alone on Lilith with a stranger in my mirror. And so I took myself beyond the manrealm, past the furthest reach of human arms, to the wet dimness of Croan'dhenni, where whispers said a new life could be found. I wanted to look into a mirror once more, and find the old friend that I had lost.

Instead I found more strangers.

The first was the painlord itself; mindlord, lifelord, master of life and death. Before my coming, it had ruled here forty-odd standard years. It was Croan'dhic, a native, a great bulbous thing with swollen eyes and mottled blue-green skin, a grotesque parody of a toad with slender, double-jointed arms and three long vertical maws like wet black wounds in its fragrant flesh. When I looked upon it, I could taste its weakness; it was vastly fat, a sea of spreading blubber with an odor like rotten eggs, where the Croan'dhic guards and servants were well-muscled and hard. But to topple the mindlord, you must become the mindlord. When we played the game of mind, I took its life, and woke in that vile body.

It is no easy thing for a human mind to wear an alien skin; for a day and a night I was lost inside that hideous flesh, sorting through sights and sounds and smells that made no more sense than the images in a nightmare, screaming, clawing for control and sanity. I survived. A

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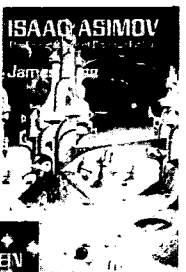

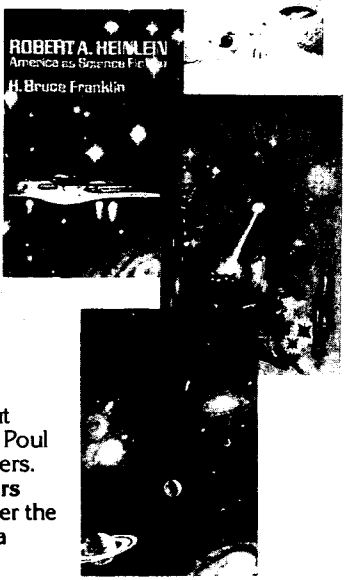

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triumph of spirit over flesh. When I was ready, another game of mind was called, and this time I emerged with the body of my choice.

She was a human. Thirty-nine years of age by her reckoning, healthy, plain of face but strong of body, a professional gambler who had come to Croan'dhenni for the ultimate game. She had long red-brown hair and eyes whose blue-green color reminded me of the seas of Gulliver. She had some strength, but not enough. In those distant days, before the coming of Khar Dorian and his slavers' fleet, few humans found their way to Croan'dhenni. My choice was limited. I took her.

That night I looked into the mirror once again. It was still a stranger's face, hair too long, eyes of the wrong hue, a nose as straight as the blade of a knife, a careful guarded mouth that had done too little smiling.

Years afterward, when that body began to cough blood from some infernal pestilence out of the Croan'dhic swamps, I built a room of obsidian mirrors to meet each new stranger. Years pass more swiftly than I care to think while that room remains sealed and inviolate, but always, finally, the day comes when I know I will be visiting it once more, and then my servants climb the stairs and polish the black mirrors to fine dark sheen, and when the game of mind is done I ascend alone and strip off my clothing and stand and turn in solitude, slow dancing with the images of others:

High, sharp cheekbones and dark eyes sunk in deep hollows beneath her brow. A face shaped like a heart, surrounded by a nimbus of wild black hair, large pale breasts tipped with brown.

Taut lean muscles moving beneath oiled red-brown skin, long fingernails sharp as claws, a narrow pointed chin, brown hair like wire bristles cut in a thin high stripe across her scalp and halfway down her back, the hot scent of rut heavy between her thighs. My thighs? On a thousand worlds, humanity changes in a thousand different ways.

Massive bony head looking down at the world from near three meters height, beard and hair blending into one leonine mane as bright as beaten gold, strength written large in every bone and sinew, the broad flat chest with its useless red nipples, the strangeness of the long, soft penis between my legs. Too much strangeness for me; the penis stayed soft all the months I wore that body, and that year my mirrored room was opened twice.

A face very like the one that I remember. But how well do I remember? A century was gone to dust, and I kept no likenesses of the faces I had worn. From my first youth long ago, only the glass flower remained. But she had short brown hair, a smile, gray-green eyes. Her neck was too long, her breasts too small, perhaps. But she was close, close, until she grew old, and the day came came when I glimpsed another stranger walking beside me inside the castle walls.

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And now the haunted child. In the mirrors she looks like a daughter of dreams, the daughter I might have birthed had I been far lovelier than I ever was. Khar brought her to me, a gift he said, a most beautiful gift, to repay me in kind after I had found him gray and impotent, hoarse of voice and scarred of face, and made him young and handsome.

She is perhaps eleven years old, perhaps twelve. Her body is gaunt and awkward, but the beauty is there, locked inside, just beginning to blossom. Her breasts are budding now, and her blood first came less than half a year ago. Her hair is silver-gold, long and straight, a glittering cascade that falls nearly to her heels. Her eyes are large in her small face, and they are the deepest, purest violet. Her face is something sculpted. She was bred to be thus, no doubt of that; genetic tailoring has made the Shrikan trade-lords and the wealthy of Lilith and Fellanora a breathtakingly beautiful folk.

When Khar brought her to me, she was shy of seven, her mind already gone, a whimpering animal thing screaming in a dark locked room within her skull. Khar says she was that way when he bought her, the dispossessed daughter of a Fellanei robber baron toppled and executed for political crimes, his family and friends and retainers slain with him or turned into mindless sexual playthings for his victorious enemies. That is what Khar says. Most of the time I even believe him.

She is younger and prettier than I can ever remember being, even in my lost first youth on Ash, where a nameless boy gave me a glass flower. I hope to wear this sweet flesh for as many years as I wore the body I was born to. If I dwell here long enough, perhaps the day will come when I can look into a dark mirror and see my own face again.

One by one they ascended unto me; through Wisdom to rebirth, or so they hoped.

High above the swamps, locked within my tower, I prepared for them in the changing chamber, hard by my unimpressive throne. The Artifact is not prepossessing; a rudely-shaped bowl of some soft alien alloy, charcoal gray in color and faintly warm to the touch, with six niches spaced evenly around the rim. They are seats; cramped, hard, uncomfortable seats, designed for obviously nonhuman physiognomies, but seats nonetheless. From the floor of the bowl rises a slender column that blossoms into another seat, the awkward cup that enthrones . . . choose the title you like best. Painlord, mindlord, lifelord, giver and taker, operator, trigger, master. All of them are me. And others before me, the chain rattling back to The White and perhaps earlier, to the makers, the unknowns who fashioned this machine in the dimness of distant eons.

If the chamber has its drama, that is my doing. The walls and ceiling are curved, and fashioned laboriously of a thousand individual pieces of

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polished obsidian. Some shards are cut very thin, so the gray light of the Croan'dhic sun can force its way through. Some shards are so thick as to be almost opaque. The room is one color, but a thousand shades, and for those who have the wit to see it, it forms a great mosaic of life and death, dreams and nightmares, pain and ecstacy, excess and emptiness, everything and nothing, blending one into the other, around and around unending, a circle, a cycle, the worm that eats its own tail forever, each piece individual and fragile and razor-edged and each part of a greater picture that is vast and black and brittle.

I stripped and handed my clothing to Rannar, who folded each garment neatly. The cup is topless and egg-shaped. I climbed inside and folded my legs beneath me in a lotus, the best possible compromise between the lines of the Artifact and the human physique. The interior walls of the machine began to bleed; glistening red-black fluid beading on the gray metal of the egg, each globule swelling fatter and heavier until it burst. Streams trickled down the smooth, curved walls, and the moisture began to collect at the bottom. My bare skin burned where the fluid touched me. The flow came faster and heavier, the fire creeping up my body, until I was half immersed.

"Send them in," I told Rannar. How many times have I said those words? I have lost count.

The prizes were led in first. Khar Dorian came with the tattooed boy. "There," Khar said offhandedly, gesturing to a seat while smiling lasciviously for me, and the hard youth, this killer, this wild bloody tough, shrank away from his escort and took the place assigned to him. Braje, my biomed, brought the woman. They too are of a kind, pallid, overweight, soft. Braje giggled as she fastened the manacles about her complaisant charge. The hatchling fought, its lean muscles writhing, its great wings beating together in a dramatic but ultimately ineffectual thunderclap as huge, glowering Jonas and his men forced it down into its niche. As they manacled it into place, Khar Dorian grinned and the g'vhern made a high, thin whistling sound that hurt the ears.

Craimur Delhune had to be carried in by his aides and hirelings. "There," I told them, pointing, and they propped him awkwardly into one of the niches. His shrunken, wizened face stared at me, half-blind eyes darting around the chamber like small, feral beasts, his mouth sucking greedily, as if his rebirth was done and he sought a mother's breast. He was blind to the mosaic; for him, it was only a dark room with black glass walls.

Rieseen Jay swaggered in, bored by my chamber before she even entered it. She saw the mosaic but gave it only a cursory glance, as something beneath her notice, too tiresome to study. Instead she made a slow circuit of the niches, inspecting each of the prizes like a butcher exam-

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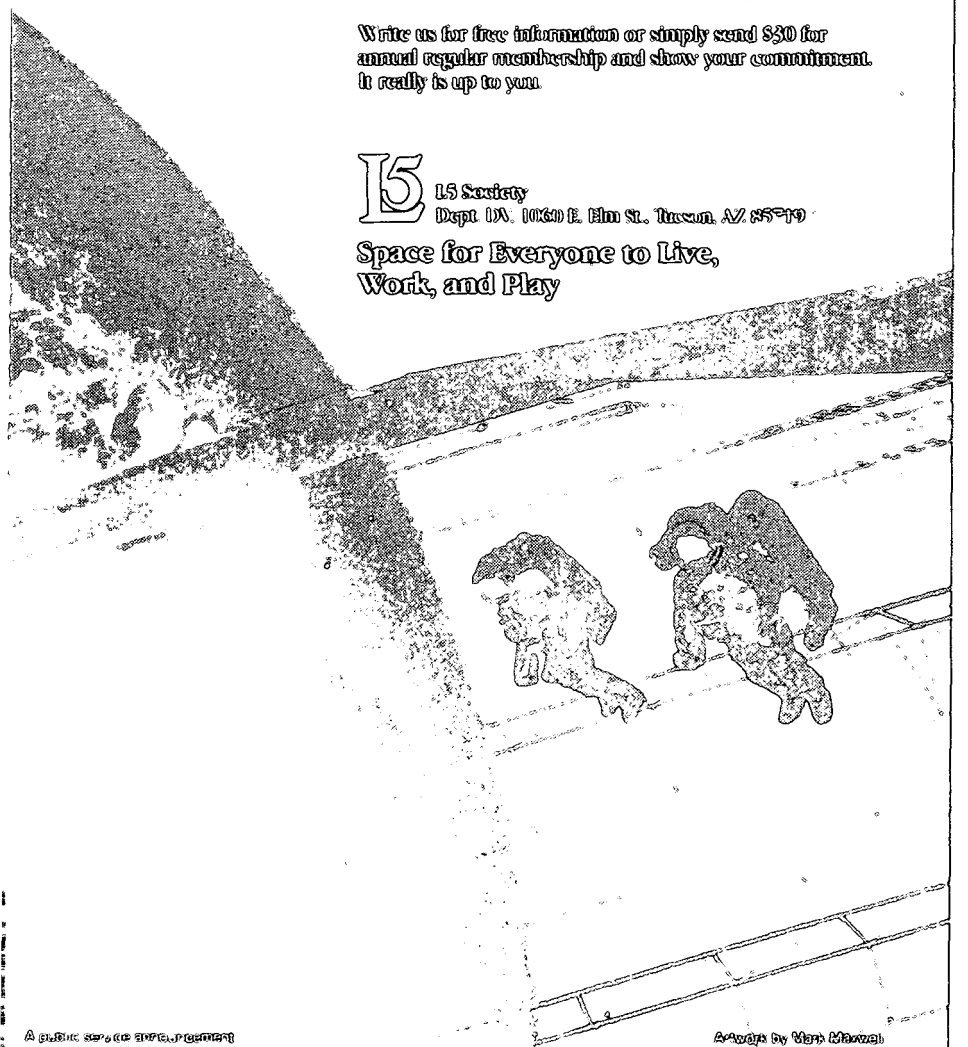

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ining the meat. She lingered longest in front of the hatchling, seeming to delight in its struggles, its obvious fear, the way it hissed and whistled at her and glared from those fierce, bright eyes. She reached out to touch a wing, and leapt back, laughing, when the hatchling bit at her. Finally she took herself to a seat, where she sprawled languidly, waiting for the game to begin.

Finally Kleronomas.

He saw the mosaic at once, stopped, stared up at it, his crystalline eyes scanning slowly around the room, halting here and there again to study some fine detail. He paused so long that Rieseen Jay grew impatient, and snapped at him to take a seat. The cyborg studied her, metal face unreadable. "Quiet," I said.

He finished his study of the dome, taking his own time, and only then seated himself in the final empty niche. The way he took his place was as if all the seats had been vacant and this was his choice, selected by him alone.

"Clear the room," I commanded. Rannar bowed and gestured them out, Jonas and Braje and the others. Khar Dorian went last, and made a gesture at me as he took his leave. Meaning what? Good luck? Perhaps. I heard Rannar seal the door.

"Well?" demanded Rieseen Jay.

I gave her a look that silenced her. "You are all seated in the Siege Perilous," I said. I always began with those words. No one ever understood. This time . . . Kleronomas, perhaps. I watched the mask that was his face. Within the crystal of his eyes, I saw a slight shifting motion, and tried to find a meaning in it. "There are no rules in the game of mind. But I have rules, for when it is over, when you are back in my domain.

"Those of you who are here unwillingly, if you are strong enough to hold the flesh you wear, it is yours forever. I give it to you freely. No prize plays more than once. Hold fast to your birthflesh and when it is done, Khar Dorian will take you back to the world he found you on and set you loose with a thousand standards and your freedom.

"Those players who find rebirth this day, who rise in strange flesh when this game is ended, remember that what you have won or lost is your own doing, and spare me your regrets and recriminations. If you are dissatisfied with the outcome of this gaming, you may of course play again. If you have the price.

"One last warning. For all of you. This is going to hurt. This is going to hurt more than anything you ever imagined."

So saying, I began the game of mind.

Once more.

* * *

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What can you say about pain?

Words can trace only the shadow of the thing itself. The reality of hard, sharp physical pain is like nothing else, and it is beyond language. The world is too much with us, day and night, but when we hurt, when we really hurt, the world melts and fades and becomes a ghost, a dim memory, a silly unimportant thing. Whatever ideals, dreams, loves, fears, and thoughts we might have had become ultimately unimportant. We are alone with our pain, it is the only force in the cosmos, the only thing of substance, the only thing that matters, and if the pain is bad enough and lasts long enough, if it is the sort of agony that goes on and on, then all the things that are our humanity melt before it and the proud sophisticated computer that is the human brain becomes capable of but a single thought:

Make it stop, make it STOP!

And if the pain does eventually stop, afterwards, with the passage of time, even the mind that has experienced it becomes unable to comprehend it, unable to remember how bad it truly was, unable to describe it so as to even approach the terrible truth of what it felt like when it was happening.

In the game of mind, the agony of the painfield is like no other pain, like nothing I have ever experienced.

The painfield does no harm to the body, leaves no marks, no scars, no injuries, no signs to mark its passing. It touches the mind directly with an agony beyond my power to express. How long does it last? A question for relativists. It lasts but the smallest part of a microsecond, and it lasts forever.

The Wisdoms of Dam Tullian are masters of a hundred different disciplines of mind and body, and they teach their acolytes a technique for isolating pain, dissociating from it, pushing it away and thus transcending it. I had been a Wisdom for half my life when I first played the game of mind. I used all I had been taught, all the tricks and truths I had mastered and learned to rely on. They were utterly useless. This was a pain that did not touch the body, a pain that did not race along the nerve paths, it was a pain that filled the mind so completely and so shatteringly that not even the smallest part of you was free to think or plan or meditate. The pain was you, and you were the pain. There was nothing to dissociate from, no cool sanctum of thought where you might retreat.

The painfield was infinite and eternal, and from that ceaseless and unthinkable agony there was only one sure surcease. It was the old one, the true one, the same balm that has been succor to billions of men and women, and even the smallest of the beasts of the field, since the beginning of time. Pain's dark lord. My enemy, my lover. Again, yet again, wanting only an end to suffering, I rushed to his black embrace.

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Death took me, and the pain ended.

On a vast, echoey plain in a place beyond life, I waited for the others.

Dim shadows taking form from the mists. Four, five, yes. Have we lost some of them? It would not surprise me. In three games out of four, a player finds his truth in death and seeks no further. This time? No. I see the sixth shape striding out of the writhing fog, we are all here, I look around myself once more, count three, four, five, six, seven, and me, me eight.

Eight?

That's wrong, that's very wrong. I am dizzy, disoriented. Nearby someone is screaming. A little girl, sweet-faced, innocent, dressed in pastels and pretty gems. She does not know how she got here, she does not understand, her eyes are lost and childish and far too trusting, and the pain has woken her from a dreamdust languor to a strange land full of fear.

I raise a small, strong hand, gaze at the thick brown fingers, the patch of callus by my thumb, the blunt wide nails trimmed to the quick. I make a fist, a familiar gesture, and in my hand a mirror takes shape from the iron of my will and the quicksilver of my desire. Within its glittering depths I see a face. It is the face of a woman who is both hard and strong, with deep lines around her gray eyes from squinting into alien suns, a wide mouth not without its generosity, a nose once broken that has not healed straight, short brown hair in perpetual disarray. A comfortable face. It gives me comfort now.

The mirror dissolves into smoke. The land, the sky, everything is shifting and uncertain. The sweet little girl is still screaming for her daddy. Some of the others are staring at me, lost. There is a young man, plain of face, his black hair swept back straight and feathered with color in a style that has not been the fashion on Gulliver for a century. His body looks soft, but in his eyes I see a hard edge that reminds me of Khar Dorian. Rieseen Jay seems stunned, wary, frightened, but still she is recognizably Rieseen Jay; whatever else might be said of her, she has a strong sense of who she is. Perhaps that will even be enough. The g'vhern looms near her, far larger here than it seemed before, its body glistening with oils as it spreads demonic wings and begins to whip the fog into long gray ribbons. In the game of mind, it wears no manacles; Rieseen Jay looks long, and cowers away from it. So too does another player, a wisty gray shape covered by a blaze of tattoos, his face a pale blur with neither purpose nor definition. The little girl screams on and on. I turn away from them, leave them to their own devices, and face the final player.

A big man, his skin the color of polished ebony with a dark blue

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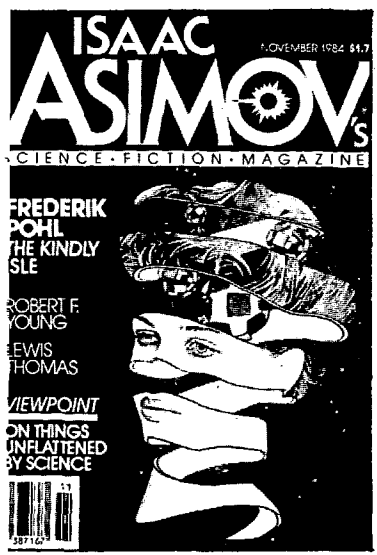

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undertone where his long muscles flex as he stretches. He is naked. His jaw is square and heavy, jutting sharply forward. Long hair surrounds his face and falls past his shoulders, hair as white and crisp as fresh bedsheets, as white as the untouched snow of a world that men have never walked. As I watch him, his thick, dark penis stirs against his leg, swells, grows erect. He smiles at me. "Wisdom," he says.

Suddenly I'm naked too.

I frown, and now I wear an ornate suit of armor, overlapping plates of gilded duralloy, filigreed with forbidding runes, and beneath my arm is a matching antique helmet, festooned with a plume of bright feathers. "Joachim Kleronomas," I say. His penis grows and thickens until it is an absurd fat staff that presses hard against the flatness of his stomach. I cover it, and him, in a uniform from a history text, all black and silver, with the bluegreen globe of Old Earth sewn on his right sleeve and twin silver galaxies swirling on his collar.

"No," he says, amused, "I never reached that rank," and the galaxies are gone, replaced by a circle of six silver stars. "And for most of my time, Wisdom, my allegiance was to Avalon, not Earth." His uniform is less martial, more functional, a simple gray-green jumpsuit with a black fabric belt and a pocket heavy with pens. Only the silver circle of stars remains. "There," he says.

"Wrong," I tell him. "Wrong still." And when I am done talking, only the uniform remains. Inside the cloth the flesh is gone, replaced by silver-metal mockery, a shining empty thing with a toaster for a head. But only for an instant. Then the man is back, frowning, unhappy. "Cruel," he says to me. The hardness of his penis strains at the fabric of his crotch.

Behind him, the eighth man, the ghost who ought not to be here, the misplaced phantom, makes a soft whispery sound, a sound like the rustling of dry dead leaves in a cold autumn wind.

He is a thin, shadowy thing, this intruder. I must look at him very hard to see him at all. He is much smaller than Kleronomas, and he gives the impression of being old and frail, though his flesh is so wispy, so insubstantial, that it is hard to be sure. He is a vision suggested by the random drift of the fog, perhaps, an echo dressed in faded white, but his eyes glow and shimmer and they are trapped and afraid. He reaches out to me. The flesh of his hand is translucent, pulled tightly over gray ancient bones.

I back away, uncertain. In the game of mind, the lightest touch can have a terrible reality.

Behind me I hear more screaming, the terrible wild sound of someone in an ecstacy of fear. I turn.

It has begun in earnest now. The players are seeking their prey. Craimur Delhune, young and vital and far more muscular than he was a

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moment ago, stands with a flaming sword in one hand, swinging it easily at the tattooed boy. The boy is on his knees, shrieking, trying to cover himself with upraised arms, but Delhune's bright blade passes through the gray shadowflesh unimpeded, and slices at the shining tattoos. He removes them from the boy surgically, swing by swing, and they drift upwards in the misty air, shining images of life cut free of the gray skin on which they were imprisoned. Delhune snatches them as they float by and swallows them whole. Smoke drifts from his nostrils and his open mouth. The boy screams and cringes. Soon there will be nothing left but shadow.

The hatchling has taken to the air. It circles above us, keening at us in its high, thin voice as its wings thunder.

Rieseen Jay has had second thoughts, it seems. She stands above the whimpering little girl, who grows less little with each passing moment. Jay is changing her. She is older now, fatter, her eyes just as frightened but far more vacant. Wherever she turns her head, mirrors appear and sing taunts at her with fat wet lips. Her flesh swells and swells, tearing free of her poor, frayed clothing; thin lines of spittle run down her chin. She wipes at it, crying, but it only flows faster, and now it turns pink with blood. She is enormous, gross, revolting. "That's you," the mirrors say. "Don't look away. Look at yourself. You're not a little girl. Look, look, look. Aren't you pretty? Aren't you sweet? Look at you, look at you." Rieseen Jay folds her arms, smiles with satisfaction.

Kleronomas looks at me with cold judgment on his face. A band of black cloth wraps itself about my eyes. I blink, vanish it, glare at him. "I'm not blind," I say. "I see them. It is not my fight."

The fat woman is as large as a truck, as pale and soft as a maggot. She is naked and immense and with each blink of Jay's eyes she grows more monstrous. Huge white breasts burst forth from her face, hands, thighs, and the brown meaty nipples open gaping mouths and begin to sing. A thick green penis appears above her vagina, curls down, enters her. Cancers blossom on her skin like a field of dark flowers. And everywhere are the mirrors, blinking in and out, reflecting and distorting and enlarging, relentlessly showing her everything she is, documenting every grotesque fancy that Jay inflicts upon her. The fat woman is hardly human. From a mouth the size of my head, gumless and bleeding, she issues forth a sound like the wailing of the damned. Her flesh begins to smoke and tremble.

The cyborg points. All the mirrors explode.

The mist is full of daggers, shards of silvered glass flying everywhere. One comes at me and I make it gone. But the others, the others . . . they curve like smart missiles, become an aerial flotilla, attack. Rieseen Jay

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is pierced in a thousand places, and the blood drips from her eyes, her breasts, her open mouth. The monster is a little girl again, crying.

"A moralist," I say to Kleronomas.

He ignores me, turns to look at Craimur Delhune and the shadow boy. Tattoos flame to new life upon the youth's skin, and in his hand a sword appears and takes fire. Delhune takes a step back, unnerved. The boy touches his flesh, mouths some silent oath, rises warily.

"An altruist," I say. "Giving succor to the weak."

Kleronomas turns. "I hold no brief with slaughter."

I laugh at him. "Maybe you're just saving them for yourself, cyborg. If not, you had better grow wings fast, before your prize flies away."

His face is cold. "My prize is in front of me," he says.

"Somehow I knew that," I reply, donning my plumed helmet. My armor is alive with golden highlights, my sword is a spear of light.

My armor is as black as the pit, and the designs worked upon it, black on black, are of spiders and snakes and human skulls and faces a-writhe with pain. My long straight silver sword turns to obsidian, and twists into a grotesquerie of barbs and hooks and cruel spikes. He has a sense of drama, this damned cyborg. "No," I say. "I will not be cast as evil." I am gold and silver once more, shining, and my plumes are red and blue. "Wear the suit yourself if you like it so much."

It stands before me, black and hideous, the helmet open on a grinning skull. Kleronomas sends it away. "I need no props," he says. His gray-and-white ghost flitters at his side, plucking at him. Who is that? I wonder yet again.

"Fine," I say. "Then we'll dispense with the symbols."

My armor is gone.

I hold out my bare, open hand. "Touch me," I say. "Touch me, cyborg."

As his hand reaches out to mine, metal creeps up his long dark fingers.

In the game of mind, even more than in life, image and metaphor are everything.

The place beyond time, the endless fog-shrouded plain, the cold sky and the uncertain earth beneath us, even that is illusion. It is mine, all of it, a setting—however unearthly, however surreal—against which the players may act out their tawdry dramas of dominance and submission, conquest and despair, death and rebirth, rape and mind-rape. Without my shaping, my vision, and the visions of all the other painlords through the eons, they would have no ground below, no sky above, no place to set their feet, no feet to set. The reality offers not even the scant comfort of the barren landscape I give them. The reality is chaos, unendurable, outside of space and time, bereft of matter or energy, without measurement and therefore frighteningly infinite and suffocatingly claustropho-

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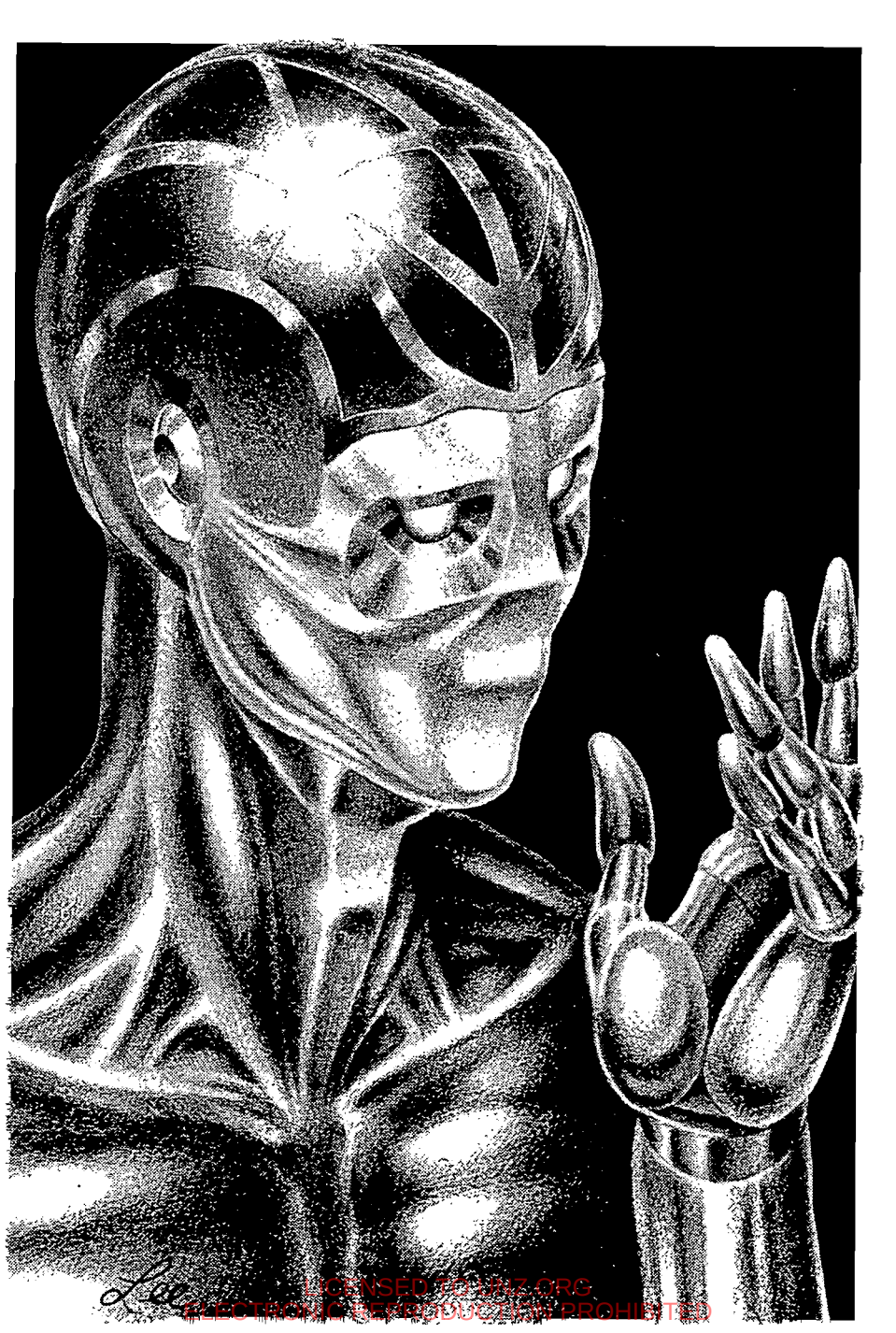

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bic, terribly eternal and achingly brief. In that reality the players are trapped; seven minds locked into a telepathic gestalt, into a congress so intimate it cannot be borne by most. And therefore they shrink away, and the very first things we create, in a place where we are gods (or devils, or both), are the bodies we have left behind. Within these walls of flesh we take our refuge and try to order chaos.

The blood has the taste of salt; but there is no blood, only illusion. The cup holds a black and bitter drink; but there is no cup, only an image. The wounds are open and raw, dripping anguish; but there are no wounds, no body to be wounded, only metaphor, symbol, conjuring. Nothing is real, and everything can hurt, can kill, can evoke a lasting madness.

To survive, the players must be resilient, disciplined, stable, and ruthless; they must possess a ready imagination, an extensive vocabulary of symbols, a certain amount of psychological insight. They must find the weakness in their opponent, and hide their own phobias thoroughly. The rules are simple. Believe in everything; believe in nothing. Hold tight to yourself and your sanity.

Even when they kill you, it has no meaning, unless you believe that you have died.

Upon this plain of illusion where these all-too-mutable bodies whirl and feint in a trite pavane that I have seen a thousand times before, plucking swords and mirrors and monsters from the air to throw at one another like jugglers gone mad, the most frightening thing of all is a simple touch.

The symbolism is direct, the meaning clear. Flesh upon flesh. Stripped of metaphor, stripped of protection, stripped of masks. Mind upon mind. When we touch, the walls are down.

Even time is illusory in the game of mind; it runs as fast, or as slow, as we desire.

I am Cyrain, I tell myself, born of Ash, far-traveled, a Wisdom of Dam Tullian, master of the game of mind, mistress of the obsidian castle, ruler of Croan'dhenni, mindlord, painlord, lifelord, whole and immortal and invulnerable. Enter me.

His fingers are cool and hard.

I have played the game of mind before, have clasped hands with others who thought themselves strong. In their minds, in their souls, in them, I have seen things. In dark gray tunnels I have traced the graffiti of their ancient scars. The quicksand of their insecurities has clutched at my boots. I have smelled the rank odor of their fears, great swollen beasts who dwell in a palpable living darkness. I have burned my fingers on the hot flesh of lusts who will not speak a name. I have ripped the cloaks from their still, quiet secrets. And then I have taken it all, been them,

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lived their lives, drunk the cold draught of their knowledge, rummaged through their memories. I have been born a dozen times, have suckled at a dozen teats, have lost a dozen virginities, male and female.

Kleronomas was different.

I stood in a great cavern, alive with lights. The walls and floor and ceiling were translucent crystal, and all around me spires and cones and twisted ribbons rose bright and red and hard, cold to the touch yet alive, the soulsparks moving through them everywhere. A crystalline fairy city in a cave. I touched the nearest outcropping, and the memory flooded into me, the knowledge as clear and sharp and certain as the day it had been etched there. I turned and looked around with new eyes, now discerning rigid order where initially I had perceived only chaotic beauty. It was clean. It was chilly and efficient and eternal and incredibly clean. It took my breath away. I looked everywhere for the vulnerability, the door of gangrenous flesh, the pool of blood, the place of weeping, the shuffling unclean thing that must live deep inside him, and I found nothing, nothing, nothing, only perfection, only the clean sharp crystal, so very red, glowing from within, growing, changing, yet eternal. I touched it once again, wrapping my hand about an outcropping that rose in front of me like a stalagmite. The knowledge was mine. I began to walk, touching, touching, drinking everywhere. Glass flowers bloomed on every side, fantastic scarlet blooms, fragile and beautiful. I took one and sniffed at it, but it had no scent. The perfection was daunting. Where was his weakness? Where was the hidden flaw in this diamond that would enable me to crack it with a single sharp blow?

Here within him there was no decay.

Here there was no place for death.

Here nothing lived.

It felt like home.

And then in front of me the ghost took form, gray and gaunt and unsteady. His bare feet sent up thin tendrils of smoke as they trod lightly on the gleaming crystals underneath, and I caught the scent of burning meat. And I smiled. The specter haunted the crystal maze, but every touch meant pain and destruction. "Come here," I said. He looked at me. I could see the lights on the far side of the cavern through the haze of his uncertain flesh. He moved to me and I opened my arms to him, entered him, possessed him.

I seated myself upon a balcony in the highest tower of my castle, and drank from a small cup of fragrant black coffee laced with brandy. The swamps were gone; instead I gazed upon mountains, hard and cold and clean. They rose blue-white all around me, and from the highest peak flew a plume of snow crystals caught in a steady endless wind. The wind

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cut through me, but I scarcely felt it. I was alone and at peace, the coffee tasted good, and death was far away.

He walked out upon the balcony, and seated himself upon one of the parapets. His pose was casual, insolent, confident. "I know you," he said. It was the ultimate threat.

I was not afraid. "I know you," I said. "Shall I conjure up your ghost?"

"He will be here soon enough. He is never far from me."

"No," I said. I sipped my coffee, and let him wait. "I am stronger than you," I told him finally. "I can win the game, cyborg. You were wrong to challenge me."

He said nothing.

I set down my cup, drained and empty, passed my hand across it, smiled as my glass flower grew and spread its colorless transparent petals. A broken rainbow crawled across the table.

He frowned. Color crept into my flower. It softened and drooped, the rainbow was banished. "The other was not real," he said. "A glass flower is not alive."

I held up his rose, pointed at the broken stem. "This flower is dying," I said. In my hands, it became glass once again. "A glass flower lasts forever."

He transmuted the glass back to living tissue. He was stubborn, I will say that for him. "Even dying, it lives."

"Look at its imperfections," I said. I pointed them out, one by one. "Here an insect has gnawed upon it. Here a petal has grown malformed, here, these dark splotches, those are blight, here the wind has bent it. And look what I can do." I took the largest, prettiest petal between thumb and forefinger, ripped it off, fed it to the wind. "Beauty is no protection. Life is terribly vulnerable. And ultimately, all of it ends like this." In my hand, the flower turned brown and shriveled and began to rot. Worms festered upon it briefly, and foul black fluids ran from it, and then it was dust. I crumpled it, blew it away, and from behind his ear I plucked another flower. Glass.

"Glass is hard," he said, "and cold."

"Warmth is a byproduct of decay, the stepchild of entropy," I told him.

Perhaps he would have replied, but we were no longer alone. Over the crenellated edge of the parapets the ghost came crawling, pulling himself up with frail gray-white hands that left bloody stains upon the purity of my stone. He stared at us wordlessly, a half-transparent whispering in white. Kleronomas averted his eyes.

"Who is he?" I ask.

The cyborg could not answer.

"Do you even remember his name?" I asked him. He replied with silence, and I laughed at them both. "Cyborg, you judged me, found my

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morality suspect, my actions tainted, but whatever I might be, I am nothing to you. I steal their bodies. You've taken his mind. Haven't you? *Haven't you?"*

"I never meant to," he said.

"Joachim Kleronomas died on Avalon seven hundred years ago, just as they say he did. Steel and plastic he might wear, but inside he was still rotting flesh, even at the end, and with all flesh there comes a time when the cells die. A thin flat line on a machine, glowing in the darkness, and an empty metal shell. The end of a legend. What did they do then? Scoop out the brain and bury it beneath some oversized monument? No doubt." The coffee was strong and sweet; here it never grew lukewarm because my will did not permit it. "But they did not bury the machine, did they? That expensive, sophisticated cybernetic organism, the library computer with its wealth of knowledge, the crystal matrix with all its frozen memories. All that was too valuable to discard. The good scientists of Avalon kept it in an interface with the Academy's main system, correct? How many centuries passed before one of them decided to don that cyborg body again, and keep his own death at bay?"

"Less than one," the cyborg said. "Less than fifty standard years."

"He should have erased you," I said. "But why? His brain would be riding the machine, after all. Why deny himself access to all that marvelous knowledge, why destroy those crystallized memories? Why, when he could savor them instead? How much better to have a whole second lifetime at his disposal, to be able to access wisdom he had never earned, recollect places he had never been and people he had never met." I shrugged, and looked at the ghost. "Poor stupid thing. If you'd ever played the game of mind, you might have understood."

What can the mind be made of, if not memories? Who are we, after all? Only who we think we are, no more, no less.

Etch your memories on diamond, or on a block of rancid meat, those are the choices. Bit by bit the flesh must die, and give way to steel and metal. Only the diamond memories survive to drive the body. In the end no flesh remains, and the echoes of lost memories are ghostly scratchings on the crystal.

"He forgot who he was," the cyborg said. "I forgot who I was, rather. I began to think . . . he began to think he was me." He looked up at me, his eyes locked on mine. They were red crystal, those eyes, and behind them I could see a glow. His skin was taking on a hard, polished sheen, silvering as I watched. And this time he was doing it himself. "You have your own weaknesses," he said, pointing.

Where it curls about the handle of my coffee cup, my hand had grown black, and spotted with corruption. I could smell the decay. Flesh began to flake off, and beneath I saw the bloody bone, bleaching to grim white-

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ness. Death crept up my bare arm, inexorably. I suppose it was meant to fill me with horror. It only filled me with disgust.

"No," I said. My arm was whole and healthy. "No," I repeated, and now I was metal, silver-bright and undying, eyes like opals, glass flowers twined through platinum hair. I could see my reflection gleaming upon the polished jet of his chest; I was beautiful. Perhaps he could see himself as well, mirrored in my chrome, for just then he turned his head away.

He seemed so strong, but on Croan'dhenni, in my castle of obsidian, in this house of pain and rebirth where the game of mind is played, things are not always as they seem.

"Cyborg," I said to him, "you are lost."

"The other players," he began.

"No." I pointed. "He will stand between you and any victim you might choose. Your ghost. Your guilt. He will not allow it. You will not allow it."

The cyborg could not look at me. "Yes," in a voice tainted by metal and corroded by despair.

"You will live forever," I said.

"No. I will go on forever. It is different, Wisdom. I can tell you the precise temperature reading of any environment, but I cannot feel heat or cold. I can see into the infrared and the ultraviolet, can magnify my sensors to count every pore on your skin, but I am blind to what I think must be your beauty. I desire life, real life, with the seed of death growing inexorably within it, and therefore giving it meaning."

"Good," I said, satisfied.

He finally looked at me. Trapped in that shining metal face were two pale, lost, human eyes. "Good?"

"I make my own meaning, cyborg, and life is the enemy of death, not its mother. Congratulations. You've won. And so have I." I rose and reached across the table, plunged my hand through the cold black chest, and ripped the crystal heart from his breast. I held it up and it shone, brighter and brighter, its scarlet rays dancing brilliantly upon the cold dark mountains of my mind.

I opened my eyes.

No, incorrect; I activated my sensors once again, and the scene in the chamber of change came into focus with a clarity and sharpness I had never experienced. My obsidian mosaic, black against black, was now a hundred different shades, each distinct from the others, the pattern crisp and clear. I was seated in a niche along the rim; in the center cup, the child-woman stirred and blinked large violet eyes. The door opened and they came to her, Rannar solicitous, Khar Dorian aloof, trying to conceal his curiosity, Braje giggling as she gave her shots.

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"No," I announced to them. My voice was too deep, too male. I adjusted it. "No, here," I said, sounding more like myself.

Their stares were like the cracking of whips.

In the game of mind, there are winners and there are losers.

The cyborg's interference had its effects, perhaps. Or perhaps not, perhaps before the game was over, the pattern would have been the same. Craimur Delhune is dead; they gave his corpse to the swamps last evening. But the vacancy is gone from the eyes of the pudgy young dreamduster, and she is dieting and exercising even now, and when Khar Dorian leaves, he will take her back to Delhune's estates on Gulliver.

Rieseen Jay complains that she was cheated. I believe she will linger here, outside, in the city of the damned. No doubt that will cure her boredom. The g'hvern struggles to speak, and has painted elaborate symbols on its wings. The tattooed boy leapt from the castle battlements a few hours after his return, and impaled himself upon the jagged obsidian spikes far below, flapping his arms until the last instant. Wings and fierce eyes do not equate with strength.

A new mindlord has begun to reign. She has commanded them to start on a new castle, a structure shaped from living woods, its foundations rooted deep in the swamps, its exterior covered with vines and flowers and other living things. "You will get insects," I have warned her, "parasites and stinging flies, miner-worms in the wood, blight in your foundation, rot in your walls. You will have to sleep with netting over your bed. You will have to kill, constantly, day and night. Your wooden castle will swim in a miasma of little deaths, and in a few years the ghosts of a million insects will swarm your halls by night."

"Nonetheless," she says, "my home will be warm and alive, where yours was cold and brittle."

We all have our symbols, I suppose.

And our fears.

"Erase him," she has warned me. "Blank the crystal, or in time he will consume you, and you will become another ghost in the machine."

"Erase him?" I might have laughed, if the mechanism permitted laughter. I can see right through her. Her soul is scrawled upon that soft, fragile face. I can count her pores and note each flicker of doubt in the pupils of those violet eyes. "Erase *me*, you mean. The crystal is home to us both, child. Besides, I do not fear him. You miss the point. Kleronomas was crystal, the ghost organic meat, the outcome inevitable. My case is different. I am as crystalline as he is, and just as eternal."

"Wisdom—" she began.

"Wrong," I said.

"Cyrain, if you prefer—"

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"Wrong again. Call me Kleronomas." I have been many things through my long and varied lives, but I have never been a legend. It has a certain cachet.

The little girl looked at me. "I am Kleronomas," she said in a high sweet voice, her eyes baffled.

"Yes," I said, "and no. Today we are both Kleronomas. We have lived the same lives, done the same things, stored the same memories. But from this day on, we walk different paths. I am steel and crystal, and you are childflesh. You wanted life, you said. Embrace it, it's yours, and all that goes with it. Your body is young and healthy, just beginning to blossom, your years will be long and full. Today you think you are still Kleronomas. And tomorrow?

"Tomorrow you will learn about lust again, and open your little thighs to Khar Dorian, and shudder and cry out as he rides you to orgasm. Tomorrow you will bear children in blood and pain, and watch them grow and age and bear children of their own, and die. Tomorrow you will ride through the swamps and the dispossessed will toss you gifts, and curse you, and praise you, and pray to you. Tomorrow new players will arrive, begging for bodies, for rebirth, for another chance, and tomorrow Khar's ships will land with a new load of prizes, and all your moral certainties will be tested, and tested again, and twisted to new shapes. Tomorrow Khar or Jonas or Sebastian Cayle will decide that they have waited long enough, and you'll taste the honeyed treason of their kiss, and perhaps you'll win, or perhaps you'll lose. There's no certainty to it. But there's one sure thing I can promise. On the day after tomorrow, long years from now though they will not seem long once passed, death will begin to grow inside you. The seed is already planted. Perhaps it will be some disease blooming in one of those small sweet breasts Rannar would so dearly love to suckle, perhaps a fine thin wire pulled tight across your throat as you sleep, perhaps a sudden solar flare that will burn this planet clean. It will come, though, and sooner than you think."

"I accept it," she said. She smiled as she spoke; I think she really meant it. "All of it, every part. Life and death. I have been without it for a long time, Wis—Kleronomas."

"Already you're forgetting things," I observed. "Every day you will lose more. Today we both remember. We remember the crystal caverns of Eris, the first ship we ever served on, the lines of our father's face. We remember what Tomas Chung said when we decided not to turn back to Avalon, and the other words he said as he lay dying. We remember the last woman we ever made love to, the shape and smell of her, the taste of her breasts, the noises she made when we pleasured her. She's been dead and gone eight hundred years, but she lives in our memories. But she's dying in yours, isn't she? Today you are Kleronomas. Yet I am him

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as well, and I am Cyrain of Ash, and a small part of me is still our ghost, poor sad man. But when tomorrow comes, I'll hold tight to all I am, and you, you'll be the mindlord, or perhaps just a sex-slave in some perfumed brothel on Cymeranth, or a scholar on Avalon, but in any case a different person than you are now."

She understood; she accepted. "So you'll play the game of mind forever," she said, "and I will never die."

"You will die," I pointed out. "Most certainly. Kleronomas is immortal."

"And Cyrain of Ash."

"Her, too. Yes."

"What will you do?" she asked me.

I went to the window. The glass flower was there, in its simple wooden vase, its petals refracting the light. I looked up at the source of that light, the brilliant sun of Croan'dhenni burning in the clear midday sky. I could look straight into it now, could focus on the sunspots and the flaming towers of its prominences. I made a small conscious adjustment to the crystal lenses of my eyes, and the empty sky was full of stars, more stars than I had ever seen before, more stars than I could possibly have imagined.

"Do?" I said, still gazing up at those secret starfields, visible to me alone. They brought to mind my obsidian mosaic. "There are worlds I've never been to," I told my sister-twin, father, daughter, enemy, mirror-image, whatever she was. "There are things I don't yet know, stars that even now I cannot see. What will I do? Everything. To begin with, everything."

As I spoke, a fat striped insect flew through the open window on six gossamer wings that trilled the air too fast for human sight, though I could count every languid beat if I so chose. It landed briefly on my glass flower, found neither scent nor pollen, and slipped back outside. I watched it go, growing smaller and smaller, dwindling in the distance, until at last I had telescoped my vision to the maximum, and the small dying bug was lost among the swamps and stars. ●

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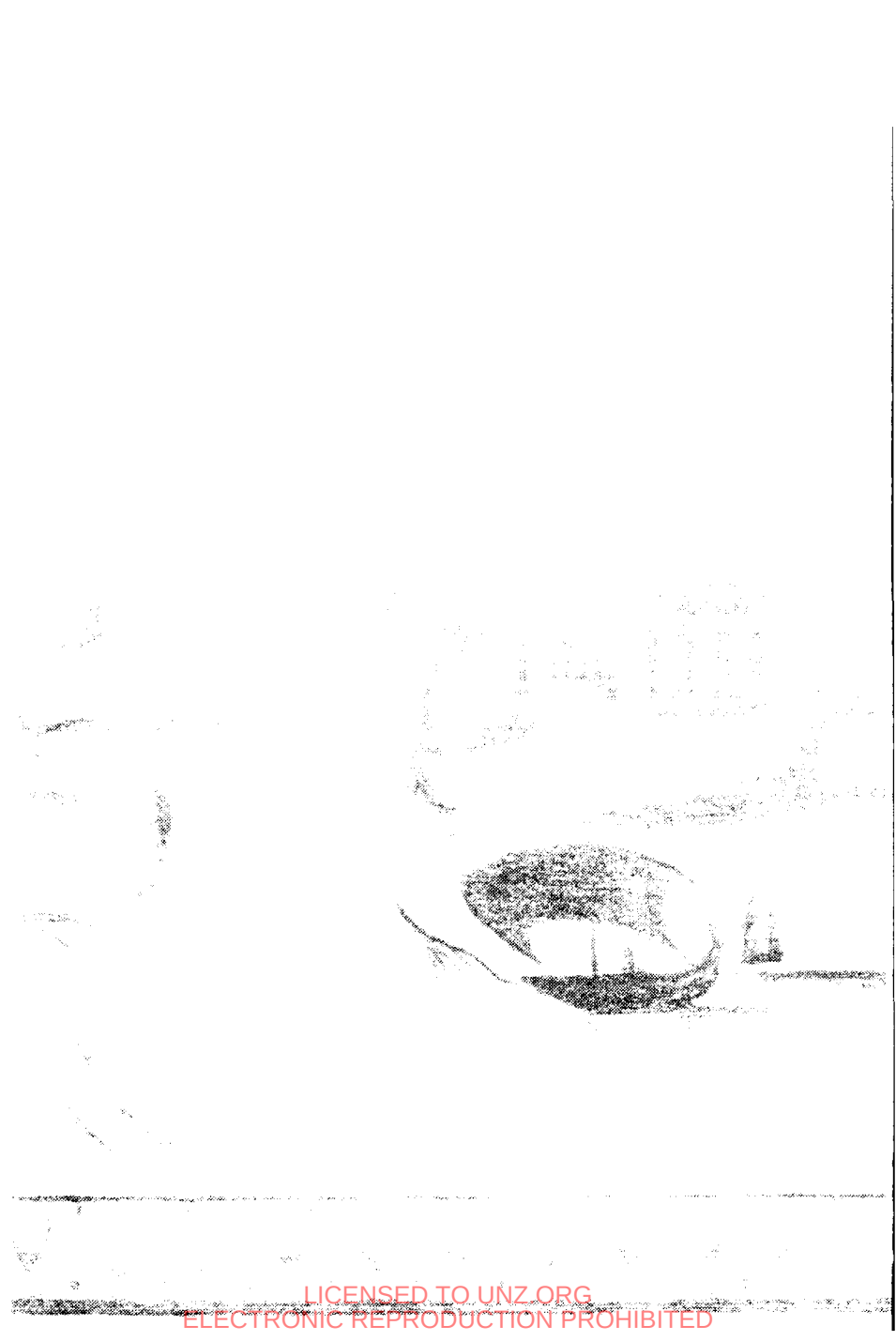

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Sally Darnowsky lives in Baltimore with her husband and her son and daughter. She has had nonfiction and poetry published, but "Without Belief" is her first published fiction.

I left the ring of men around the fire in front of the canopy and walked down to the surf, two bodyguards at my heels. We passed Eioneus and Hypsenor, who were watching over my ship, which was staked into the shingle. They saluted, but I went on to where the woman crouched in the backwash, ripples up to her ankles, torn hair pale in the moonlight, the rough chiton gathered between her knees. She did not seem to notice as I stood over her; she was trailing her fingers in the patterned water.

I looked out to sea at my fleet of eleven, heavily laden and riding low, and cursed this killing, that had cost us the tide. One last trick to keep me from home! Now that the city guarding the Dardanelles had finally been taken, visions of faces troubled me, faces of people last seen so long ago that sometimes I wondered if they still lived only in my mind—my father, strength failing ten years ago, left to hold the island kingdom if he could; my wife, slight and quick-fingered. I could remember wrenching the plow away from my son, tossed in the path of the blade by Agamemnon's soldiers come to call me to war or, if I refused, come to war on me. The salt I had been sowing in my "madness" had spilled from the sack as I bent to embrace the child . . .

"She waits. He survives. Your son honors you." The woman stood up. Facing into the moon, her eyes were silver. Her fingers, cold as eels, closed around my thumb. "You see, it's no use. Apollo forces me to tell the truth, then twists my words so that they sound like lies. It's my punishment for refusing him. I'll be dead soon enough, lying in blood with Agamemnon while his wife smiles at her lover."

I broke her grip and took her arm, her flesh clammy, mine oiled against the dampness.

"Come speak to us, woman. I don't believe anyone, prophetess, sailor or king, so it doesn't matter whether you lie. That's why I'm still alive when heroes are ash in brazen jars. Your prophesy is a mist, I walk through it."

"Blasphemer," she muttered, silver eyes closing.

The ranks of men, the sailors off my ship mingling with Agamemnon's Mycenaeans, surged around us as I brought her into the firelight, where a form covered by a cloak lay upon a litter made of javelins and shields.

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A knife, almost the length of a short sword, was stabbed into the seagrass at the head of the body. One man stood apart next to the bier, arms folded on his thick chest. A boy of about eight confronted him, naked except for a pouch strung from a thong on his neck, restrained by a guard and trembling. Something thick and congealing blackened the boy's skin and the Mycenaean's tunic. They were caked with sand and grit.

"That's her!" The boy sprang forward but the guard stopped him with a spear across the body. He gripped it in two fists. "We were hidden between the beached ships but she passed by and saw us. She ran away when she saw the knife, all bloody."

"Silence," Agamemnon said in the basso voice that could carry across a battle. The guard put his heavy hand on the boy's mouth, covering his face up to the eyes, one of them almost closed by a fresh swelling. Agamemnon motioned to Cassandra. "She'll stand by me," he said.

The men stirred as I released her and the captive took her favored place under the canopy. I sat down on the bench next to Agamemnon. The cloth bellied in the wind, adding the hum of taut ropes to the sounds of the surf and the crackling of the driftwood fire.

"Tell us again what you have to say," Agamemnon said to the Mycenaean. The man shrugged.

"If she saw us," the soldier jerked his head at Cassandra, "it must have been after I took the knife away from the boy. That's what I bought him with from Amphinides, that and a breastplate and a shield with a nick out of the top where my spear hit. After we made the deal the boy wouldn't come with me. He grabbed the knife and stuck it in Amphinides' gut." He nodded, stroking his uncombed beard. "It was a lucky blow, Amphinides went right down."

"Let the boy speak," said Agamemnon. The guard dropped his hand to the boy's shoulder.

The child drew a deep breath and shouted, "My father was going to take me back to Ithaca. He said he was old and had no other children and I could be his real son. My father told Calymnos he couldn't buy me. They started to fight. And Calymnos killed him."

"Who'd claim a camp brat for a son?" drawled Calymnos.

"What did you see?" I asked, turning to Cassandra.

She stood without movement, her head cocked as though to catch a sound. The turning tide hissed. The fire burned paler as the wind took on a new smell. Agamemnon twisted in his seat to look up at her. "You are under my protection. No one will hurt you."

Cassandra lifted her arms and let them drop. Looking mournfully at the boy, she said, "It was the soldier."

A roar of "Liar! Liar!" broke from the assembly, and Cassandra shrank back behind Agamemnon. His voice rose easily above the outcry.

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"She convicts the child out of her own mouth. One can't blame her, a courageous Achaean woman would do the same for a child of her race—"

Calymnos' features creased in puzzlement. "The Trojan bitch lies," he sputtered.

The boy tried to catch at her skirt but she pulled away, saying, "I can't help you, child, I can't help myself."

Agamemnon said, "Truss the patricide in a net and toss him into the water. Let the fish have him."

A dozen Mycenaeans caught him up, too scared to make a noise, and carried him away from the encampment. Black smoke rose in a thin spiral. The air had lightened, the darkness was beginning to lift, but the swollen moon still hung in the west. Agamemnon's men dispersed, talking loudly.

I motioned to my sailors to close around me.

"Go lay a pyre," I said. "Use the driest wood you can find and a lot of oil. We'll bring Amphinides' ashes home with us, hot."

Calymnos stared at the shrouded body, lips working.

Agamemnon unfolded his length from the bench to his full height, a head taller than I, and wrapped his cloak tightly against the morning chill. "Come, king's daughter," he said to Cassandra, "put on a fine gown and knot up your hair. You're my favorite and you'll serve me today when we feast, and ride with me when we enter Corinth." He ran his bony hand down the curve of her spine. She shuddered involuntarily. "You'll work at the loom and share my bed at night, and I'll give you a lily of silver-gilt and pearl like the one my wife wears in her girdle."

Cassandra jerked upright and stood straight, Agamemnon's hand on her neck. She looked at me as I sat, arms set squarely on my thighs.

"We have not finished here," I said quietly, and returned her steady gaze. "If you were the boy, woman, who would you say killed my countryman?"

"I would say that the soldier killed him," she answered.

Calymnos started forward and Agamemnon turned and began to speak. I gestured to stop them.

"What would you say if you were this man?"

Her mouth twitched in what could have been amusement. "I would say that the boy killed his father."

Calymnos stood still, frowning, his mouth open. "She lies again, Odysseus, they are *all* lying, all three," said Agamemnon. "Did someone *else* kill him? We won't get any clear answers from her, it's her malady, but I'll call the child back and we'll question them all again—"

"Wait," I said. "Yes. You," I turned to my guards, "bring the child here." They broke and ran toward the surf. I knelt by the body of Amphinides. "There's trickery here," I said. "I have no more stomach for it.

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Look, Agamemnon," my voice rose, "the campaign ends the way it started, in double meanings and deceit."

I turned down a corner of the cloak, leaving the distorted face open to the sky. The boy was Amphinides' seed, that much was true, born of a camp-follower, a runaway slave now dead or gone back to her croft in the hills beyond the burned city. There was little trace of her in the boy: the wide-set eyes with prominent brows, the heavy jaw, the thick hair of the child were all here in the man, though Amphinides' face was scored with harsh lines and his ragged beard showed gray. Amphinides had had two wives, I knew, both dead in childbirth in the stone hut on the far side of the island. Would he trade a male child of *any* mother's blood for a knife, a breastplate and a shield with a nick out of the top?

No one waited for him on Ithaca.

A battle-cry from the surf roused me. I shoved past Agamemnon and ran down the beach, Calymnos following, to where my bodyguards faced the Mycenaeans with poised javelins. My Opheltius had fallen to his knees, turning the seafoam dark.

I drew my sword and the Mycenaeans parted for me as I waded into the waves. "Hand him down," I said. Not one of them there dared lift a weapon against me. The boy, wrapped head to foot in a net, was dropped over the side at the end of a line. I raised my sword and the scene froze for a long second before the edge came down to slit the net from top to bottom.

"Take Calymnos," I said as they watched me. "He's the one who killed Amphinides, not the boy."

Agamemnon came up behind us. "What is this, Odysseus, my man for yours? I don't think even your cunning could unravel such a tangle of lies. I thought you just said that someone else, someone we haven't discovered yet, had stabbed Amphinides—"

Holding the boy against my thigh with my left hand, my sword in my right, I looked up at the Mycenaean with half-lidded eyes.

"You forget who I am, Agamemnon. I'm the one who tricked Achilles out of his refuge so that you'd have someone to outfight the Trojan champions. When all of you were at the end of your endurance, I'm the one who had to figure a way to take the city without any more loses." A large wave broke against our legs, staggering the boy, and I gripped him tighter. "I took the city with a handful of men while you lay offshore waiting for the signal that the gates were open. You've counted on my cunning from the beginning, Agamemnon. Believe in me now."

Agamemnon shrugged elaborately and laughed, shaking his head. "Let the boy's life be my gift to you, then, if you really feel so strongly about it." He gestured toward Calymnos, and his men sprang forward. "Take

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him," he said. They surrounded Calymnos, who, in a stupor, allowed himself to be trussed and hauled into the boat. Agamemnon turned and walked away while Calymnos still dangled, dipping into the swell. I relaxed then, and slid my sword back into the sheath slung around my shoulder.

I carried the boy out of the waves and stripped off the nets. "Do you have a name?" I asked.

"Dares." He hesitated. "I can catch fish," he offered at last.

I nodded. "I have a son who's a little older than you are. You'll go fishing with him when we get home to Ithaca."

Cassandra was waiting for us on the shingle. I smiled at her, showing my teeth.

"I suppose you're going to say that you foresaw my decision."

Her face was small and serious under the weight of light brown hair. She clasped her hands. "I knew what you would do, but I don't know how you did it."

"My deceit helped kill Achilles," I said, suddenly angry. "My tricks destroyed your home. Don't you see? People are fooled so easily. Now I refuse to believe; I only *know*."

She blocked our way. "That's not an answer."

I shouted, "Amphinides was twelve years older than I am, and he had no son!"

She looked at me calmly. Her eyes were gray. "And what if I tell you that you've saved the boy from the water now only to have him drown in a few weeks' time?"

"We all travel toward death," I said. "First we'll drink a cup of wine on my own doorstep." I hoisted the boy astride my shoulders.

"The weft of time is torn and I have fallen through," she said. "It's my curse to tell you what I see, whether or not you want to listen. You'll see home, yes, but you alone of all your company, and your hair will be white." She smiled and the sun came above the horizon, enveloping her in a golden light so that I caught my breath, because in that moment she looked beautiful enough to be the beloved of a god.

She walked on and left me frowning, the tide lapping at my feet, the boy's legs hanging down my chest, as I whispered, "Home." ●

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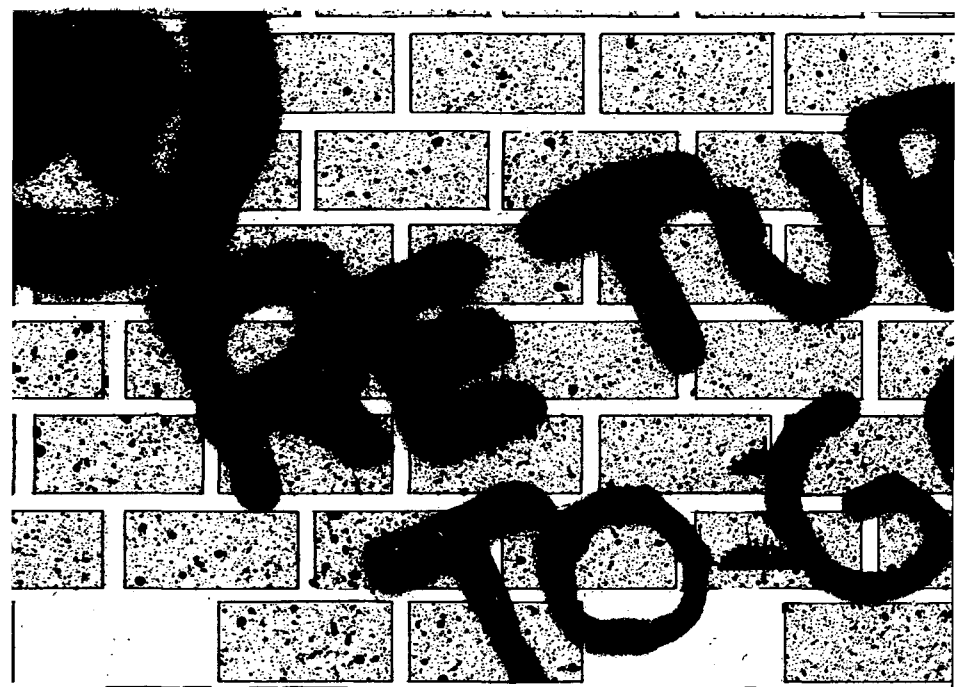

THE NEWS FROM D STREET

by Andrew Weiner

art: George Thompson

This thoroughly absorbing story combines the surreal with the hard-boiled detective milieu. The result is an intriguingly original tale.

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I bring you the news from D Street. The news is not good. The news is very bad.

I was watching the snow fall, out through the thick glass of my office window. I was watching the street lights shine in the early evening gloom. I didn't hear the door open in my outer office, or the footsteps approaching. I was not aware of anything until my visitor announced his presence.

"Mr. Kay?" he asked.

Startled, I turned in my chair.

"That's right," I said.

He was standing in front of my desk: a tall man, quite lean, somewhere in his sixties. He wore an expensive looking woolen overcoat and a hat with a wide brim. He was carrying a leather attaché case. And there was something wrong about him, something I could not place. Perhaps it was the way he stood, and perhaps it was the cut of his clothes, and perhaps it was something else again. Such intuitions are not uncommon in my line of work.

I motioned him to sit down. As he did so, I happened to glance at his shoes. They looked as clean and dry and shiny as if they had just come out of the box.

"You're an inquiry agent," he said.

His inflection was perfect, as if he had recently graduated from some language school.

"That's right," I said.

"I wish an inquiry conducted."

"What kind of inquiry?"

He opened his attaché case and pulled out a manila folder. From the folder he withdrew a large color photograph.

It was a grainy print, perhaps blown up from some smaller snapshot. It showed a man and a woman sitting at a table in a restaurant. It was, from the look of the table setting, an expensive restaurant.

The man was unprepossessing. His hair was thin, his expression was mild, his eyes were somehow mournful, like those of an excessively tame dog, and his suit jacket appeared ill-fitting or otherwise awry.

The woman was considerably younger, dark, gaunt. Her face, turned toward the camera, was carefully neutral.

"This man," he said, "is missing. We should like him found."

"We?"

"My name is Victor Lazare. I am a lawyer representing Mrs. Walter Hertz, the wife of the missing person."

He passed over a business card.

"Is this a divorce case?" I asked.

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"Only peripherally. Mr. Hertz had been separated from his wife for some months prior to his disappearance. Mrs. Hertz is anxious to conclude the divorce, and reach a final property settlement, which cannot be done easily in Mr. Hertz's absence."

"How long has he been missing?"

"For two weeks. Mr. Hertz is a manager at the Bureau of Records. He failed to show up for work one day, and he did not answer phone calls to his home. This was quite unlike him, he was known to be extremely punctilious. All efforts to reach him failed. Finally, colleagues reported the matter to the police, who gained entry to the apartment. Obviously, he was not there. Some of his clothes and personal effects were missing. Further investigation showed that he had made a substantial withdrawal from the bank the previous day."

"He took a walk."

"Apparently so. And because his departure looks voluntary, the police have no interest in pursuing the matter. Which is why we have come to you."

"He could be anywhere. He could have left town."

Perhaps so. Yet he was seen several days ago by a friend of Mrs. Hertz, when driving on Elvira Avenue. She could have been mistaken, of course, but it seems worth looking into."

"Is he hiding to frustrate settlement of the divorce?"

"It's possible. Yet the separation was amicable, as far as these things go. And we could certainly proceed to a settlement without his presence. It would only prolong matters. That is not, in any case, the only reason for this inquiry. Mrs. Hertz also wishes to be assured that he is not in some kind of trouble."

"I don't really know. But he has lately been keeping what you might call bad company. Artists, radicals, and the like."

"He doesn't exactly look the type."

"It's hardly unusual for a man reaching a certain age to behave out of character. To take up, for example, with a much younger woman."

"This woman?" I said, indicating the photo.

"Apparently so," he said. "Her name is Marcia Tromb. She is an artist of some sort."

"And a radical?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Perhaps she could help in locating Mr. Hertz?"

"I found her extremely unhelpful, but perhaps you will get better results."

The interview wound down toward its conclusion. We agreed on the terms and conditions of my employment, and Mr. Lazare departed.

* * *

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I did not especially like my client, but that was hardly a novel experience for me.

There was a new piece of graffiti spray-painted on the railway bridge. Municipal workers were already out there, in the snow, scrubbing it off.

GET OUT OF TO

Town? Get out of town? Who should get out of town? The graffiti was getting stranger every week. I wondered why anyone would write that. And as my car swerved from side to side on the icy surface of the road, I wondered why the city was more concerned with cleaning up the graffiti than with cleaning the streets.

I drove towards the apartment of Walter Hertz. It was in a relatively new high rise building out toward the end of town, within walking distance of his work at the Bureau of Records complex on D Street. The area had the emptiness, the barrenness, of any new development: stunted trees, bleak open spaces between giant concrete blocks, vast empty roads. There was not a single pedestrian on the street.

As I pulled up in front of the building I realized that I had been there the previous year. I had been conducting an inquiry for another tenant of the building, a man anxious to trace a relative with whom he had lost touch. The man's name had been Sykes, or Wicks, or Wilks, something like that, and he had lived on the twenty-third floor. Or had it been the thirty-second floor?

In the outer lobby of the building, I scanned the register. There was no Sykes, or Wicks, or any other name to jog my memory. Possibly he had moved. Possibly I was mistaken about the name. It was of no consequence, yet it irritated me all the same. Had it had been more than a year before? I could no longer even recall the outcome of the inquiry.

I let myself into the inner lobby with the keys provided by Lazare, and took the elevator up to Hertz's floor. Although the building was only a few years old, I noted that the wood paneling of the elevator was already heavily scarred with graffiti.

RETURN TO GO
CROSS THE BORDER

And so on.

It was a good size one-bedroom apartment, pleasantly decorated. Several prints and paintings hung in the living room, although I recognized none of the artists. One in particular drew my attention, a great rushing waterfall painted in vivid primary colors. It was technically accomplished, yet I found it somehow disturbing. It was signed M. Tromb.

There was a computer terminal on the desk in the bedroom. The sticker on the top read "Property of the Bureau of Records." It was locked and sealed, presumably awaiting pick-up. Someone had already cleared every

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scrap of paper from the desk drawers, and from the filing cabinet across the room. I wondered what kind of work Walter Hertz had done.

I roamed back and forth, examining books, records, tapes. Then I made a perfunctory search, feeling beneath the cushions on the couch, peering behind the pictures on the living room wall. Taped to the back of the waterfall painting I found a sheet of notepaper, covered with a hand-written scrawl. It was a list of dates and names. The names were arranged in two columns, labeled "I" and "D." I scanned the most recent entries.

	I	D
12/5	McGee J.S.	Smythe R.
	Corlander P.A.	Hicks J.T.
	Barrington K.	
12/7	Hobbs R.W.	Richards V.
		Garth T.S.

And so on. I could make nothing of it, but I put it in my pocket anyway. If Walter Hertz had chosen to conceal this document, it might have some significance.

Marcia Tromb lived in a down-at-heels apartment building in one of the shabbier parts of town. The intercom was out of order, which scarcely mattered since the lock on the inner door was broken as well.

Her apartment was on the third floor. I took the stairs rather than the elevator. In buildings like this one, I have found, it is unwise to trust the elevators.

There was more graffiti in the stairwell. No one had tried to clean it.

REALITY IS ONLY TEMPORARY

I knocked on the door. A voice asked who I was.

"Joseph Kay," I said. "I'm an inquiry agent."

I pushed my card under the door.

"Inquiring into what?" she asked, through the door.

"The disappearance of Walter Hertz," I said.

"I don't know where he is," she said, opening the door and staring out at me. "I haven't seen him in some time."

She was taller than I had expected from the photograph, and a little older, somewhere in her early thirties. Her expression, as in the photograph, was neutral, noncommital.

"Can I come in?" I asked.

"I suppose so."

The apartment was well-kept, but no amount of housekeeping could conceal its dilapidation: fissures in the plaster, cold air leaking through cracked window panes, a lingering odor of damp and decay.

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"Who hired you to look for Walter?" she asked.

"A lawyer," I said, "representing his wife. I believe you have met."

"Yes."

There were a number of paintings hanging in the living room. All seemed to be by the same hand. All were landscapes of some sort. All were vivid, startlingly so, leaping out upon the viewer. Looking at them, I felt once again a strong sense of unease.

"Yours?"

She nodded.

"Where did you paint them?"

"Right here," she said, indicating the apartment. "They are quite imaginary."

I sat down on the couch, which sagged a little under my weight. She remained standing, facing me.

"How long have you known Walter Hertz?" I asked.

"About a year," she said. "We met at his office in the Bureau of Records. I had gone to renew my license."

"Your driver's license?"

"My artist's license," she said.

"I was not aware that artists required licensing."

"It's a recent regulation, not well publicized. There had been some complaints as to the behavior of artists, and it was thought necessary to license them in order to exert greater control over their activities, much, I believe, as inquiry agents are licensed."

"So you met Mr. Hertz and you became friends."

"Yes," she said. "He expressed an interest in my work. Subsequently we saw each other from time to time. I found him to be a very pleasant man."

"In fact," I said, "you were having an affair with Walter Hertz, and it was for that reason that he left his wife."

"In fact," she said, "not. We were not sexually involved. Not that the nature of my relationship with Walter Hertz is any of your concern."

"But it is my concern," I said. "I must, to my own satisfaction, reconstruct the recent history of Walter Hertz. I must establish the truth of these matters."

"Must you?" she said.

She looked at me speculatively.

"Suppose I told you that Walter Hertz has no wife? And that the man who calls himself Victor Lazare is not who he appears to be?"

"You're saying that Hertz was unmarried? That Lazare is a fake? These matters can be easily checked."

"No doubt. I am posing a hypothetical question."

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"An odd one," I said. "Although perhaps not so odd if you wish to dissuade me from finding Walter Hertz."

"I wish nothing. I merely asked you a question."

"Then let me answer it," I said. "My assignment is to find Walter Hertz. I cannot concern myself with the motives of my clients."

"Even if Lazare wants to kill Hertz?"

"Does he?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know what Lazare wants. I am again speaking hypothetically."

"Well then," I said, "Let me answer hypothetically. No, I would not knowingly lead my client to Walter Hertz in order that he could kill him."

"How could you prevent it?"

"I will be speaking to Mrs. Hertz," I said, becoming irritated. "I will check the records if it seems necessary. I am a professional, after all. I am not so easily misled. Let's get back to Walter Hertz. When did you last see him?"

"Some weeks ago," she said. "We went to a gallery to see a new exhibition. Afterwards he did not call me. I thought little of it. Weeks would go by without him calling. Then Mr. Lazare came to see me, claiming to represent Walter's wife, and telling me of his disappearance."

"You're saying that you were not that close to Walter Hertz?"

"I'm not that close to anyone, Mr. Kay. But we were friends all the same. Walter is a cultured person, with a strong interest in art."

I took the photograph out of my pocket.

"Do you recognize this?" I asked.

She examined the photograph.

"I have never seen it before," she said.

"Do you know where this was taken?"

She shook her head.

"In the course of your relationship with Walter Hertz," I said, "did you at any time suspect that he might be under surveillance?"

"I don't know about Walter," she said. "I imagine I was, and probably still am."

"Why would you be under surveillance?"

"Because I am under suspicion, I imagine."

"Because you are a radical, Miss Tromb?"

"Because I am an artist, Mr. Kay, and therefore a suspicious person. I do not say that these suspicions are justified."

"Isn't that rather a paranoid attitude?"

"And yet," she said, indicating the photograph, "I *was* followed."

"You," I said, "or Walter Hertz. Can you think of any reason why anyone might want to do him harm? Kidnap him, perhaps, or kill him?"

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"I can think of no such reason."

"Or why he would disappear?"

"Perhaps he was tired of his work, his life. Perhaps he wanted a change."

"Was he having problems at work?"

"None that I'm aware of."

"Did you ever discuss the nature of his work?"

"Not really. He found the subject dull."

"Was he concerned about his wife's divorce action?"

"I knew nothing of any divorce."

"Did he, in fact, have a wife?"

"That's for you to determine," she said.

The Hertz residence was on a quiet tree-lined residential street. The driveway was deep in snow, as if awaiting the absent husband.

The house was large, as might befit a reasonably successful bureaucrat, but decorated blandly and without distinction. The paintings on the wall were entirely conventional.

There was a blandness, too, to Mrs. Hertz.

"How long were you married?" I asked.

"It would have been twenty-three years in December," she said. "Of course, we have been separated almost a year."

"What was the cause of the separation?"

"It was Walter's idea. He said he needed some time on his own, to think things over."

"Were you surprised when he left?"

"Not really," she said. "Lately we hadn't been getting along that well. Of course, he had been seeing that woman, Marcia Tromb, although I didn't know it at the time."

"Marcia Tromb claims that they were merely friends."

"Does she? I can't really comment on that."

"Why do you think Walter has disappeared?"

"I really couldn't say," she said. "People do these things, you know, and other people are always surprised. There are some things you just can't account for."

"But you are concerned about him?"

"Concerned? Oh, yes, quite concerned. That is why we have employed you, Mr. Kay."

"Of course," I said. "Tell me, was Mr. Hertz always interested in art?"

"In art?" she said. "Not particularly."

"You'll pardon me for asking you this," I said, "but Marcia Tromb implied that Walter Hertz had no wife. Can you think of any reason why she should have done so?"

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"No wife?" she echoed. "How curious. After all, Mr. Kay, if Walter had no wife, who is paying for your inquiries?"

More snow fell that night, and then freezing rain. I spent a good half hour scraping ice from my windshields.

I stopped at the post office on my way to the Bureau of Records, and made a photocopy of Hertz's list. I stuffed the original back in my pocket and put the copy in the glove compartment of my car.

I parked in the underground lot beneath the Bureau of Records in the hope that the remainder of the snow on my car would melt. Then I took the elevator up to speak to Hertz's immediate superior, a Mr. James.

"A funny busines," he told me. "Walter seemed such a reliable person. Not the sort to just pick up and disappear."

"You knew, of course, that he had recently separated from his wife?"

Mr. James blinked at me.

"Walter was a private person," he said. "He did not really discuss his personal life, nor socialize with people from the office. I don't recall him ever mentioning his marital difficulties. But that's not the sort of thing we would usually discuss in any case."

"But he was married?"

"Oh, yes," Mr. James said, surprised. "Of course. These things are all a matter of record. Didn't you say that you were working for Mrs. Hertz?"

"Did he seem under any strain? Were there any unusual problems in his work?"

"Not really. Things run pretty smoothly around here. It's not what you would call exciting work. Nothing that would cause you sleepless nights."

"And you were pleased with his work?"

"Oh yes," he said. "Hertz was one of our most conscientious employees. He had a very responsible position."

"Which was?"

"Records management," Mr. James said. "Senior supervisor, records management."

I pulled Hertz's list from my pocket and showed it to Mr. James.

"I found this in Hertz's apartment," I said. "Can you tell me what it is?"

James studied the list, furrowing his forehead.

"It may be some sort of work notes," he said. "You say you found this in his apartment?"

"In a desk drawer."

"I don't think it's of any great significance," Mr. James said, "but if you'll leave it with me I'll look into it."

"I," I said. "D. Are those departmental codes?"

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"Not to my knowledge," he said, "but as I said, if you'll leave it with me . . ."

"Not right now," I said, taking it away from him.

"That may well be the property of the Bureau," he said.

"If so," I said, "you may request its return from my client."

For a moment I thought he was going to insist, but he just sat there blinking at me as I took my leave.

As I walked to my car in the parking lot below the Bureau of Records building, I saw two kids completing a large graffiti on the garage wall. They worked rapidly, a well-practiced team.

GO TO THE LIMIT

"What does that mean?" I called after them, as they raced for the stairs.

One of them turned.

"Maybe you'll find out," he shouted.

And then they were gone. I crossed to the new graffiti. There was an empty spray can on the ground beside it, and a brown paper bag containing two empty coffee cups. The cups had the name of a doughnut restaurant on, the Do-Nite Garden. Careless, I thought. But maybe the kids hadn't left them at all.

Even under six inches of snow, Elvira Avenue buzzed with business, legal and otherwise. You could buy almost anything on Elvira, that was what people said. Morphine or thermal underwear, sex or gold futures, guns or kitchenware, whatever you wanted.

The graffiti was thick here, as if the city cleaning crews had given up in despair, or, more likely, refused even to venture down here.

CITY LIMITS.
GET OUT OF TOWN.

And a giant arrow, running along one whole side of a building, with accompanying caption.

TO THE END OF THE NIGHT.

There were half a dozen rooming houses up and down the street and I toured them all, photograph in hand. Blank stares, hostile stares. As I walked from one flea pit to the next I scanned the faces on the street, looking for Walter Hertz. No Walter Hertz.

I went into a bar and ordered a drink. I showed the waitress my photograph of Walter Hertz. Blank stare.

I finished my drink and crossed to the bar to show the photograph to the bartender. Hostile stare.

"I'm not the police," I said, sliding my card towards him across the surface of the bar. "I'm a private inquiry agent."

The bartender shrugged.

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"Same difference," he said.

He made no move to pick up the card. Instead he leaned towards me until our faces were almost touching. Up close I could see the tiny veins crisscrossing his nose, like a map of a misspent life.

"Out," he said. "Get out of here."

"Is that a threat?"

"A warning," he said. "Get out of here, or I cannot be responsible for the consequences."

"No one asked you to."

I ordered another drink and returned to my table.

Time passed. The bar filled up with the lunchtime crowd. I scanned their faces. Periodically, I circulated with my photograph. Finally, I left and walked slowly down the street.

There was a brand-new graffito right across the street, in two foot high letters, across the wall above a massage parlor.

BREAK OUT NOW.

A man fell in step with me at the street light.

"Don't look towards me," he said, as we crossed the street.

"How much?" he asked. "To take you to him?"

"A hundred," I said.

"Two and a half."

I nodded.

"Walk behind me."

He took off at a rapid pace. I followed about ten steps behind. He led me down the street, then up an alleyway, then through another, deeper and deeper into the secret heart of Elvira Avenue.

The alleys had not yet been ploughed of snow. Perhaps they never would be. They were quite deserted. Side windows of buildings, boarded up. Garages with yawning doors and rotting automobiles. And graffiti, a feast of graffiti.

I had lost my bearings completely, and still he crunched on through the snow ahead of me.

He turned a corner. I followed. Hands gripped my arms, turning me to face the wall. Through the corner of my eye I could see my guide give one backward glance, then disappear around another corner.

Hands went through my pockets, removed my wallet, removed Hertz's list, patted every part of my body. I did not resist.

"Joseph Kay," I heard a voice say. "Inquiry agent."

They turned me around, handed me back my wallet. Two big men, in woolen overcoats. A third man, tiny, almost dwarfish, wearing a fur coat and hat, behind them. They passed Hertz's list to him. He scanned it briefly, put it in his own inside pocket.

"You know what this is?" he asked me.

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I shook my head.

"Who are you working for?"

"Victor Lazare," I said, "a lawyer representing the wife of the missing person."

He nodded. "You may think so," he said, "but actually you're not. In any case you're out of your depth."

"Who am I working for?"

"It's of no consequence," he said, pleasantly enough, "because your inquiries are at an end. Walter Hertz does not wish to be found, and I do not wish for you to find him. My name, by the way, is Hugo Burns."

I had heard the name. Hugo Burns was a leading figure in the city's criminal subculture, although police had never succeeded in laying charges against him. He was said to have connections at the highest level, cemented by purveying various illicit pleasures to the business and governmental elite.

"I see."

"You see very little," he told me, "and that is how matters will remain."

Burns moved closer, taking his hands out of the pockets of his coat. His companions continued to hold me immobile against the wall. I braced myself for the beating that would reinforce this warning, wondering what sort of punishment this tiny man could deliver. But it did not come. Instead Burns reached up and put his hands on the lapels of my coat in an almost childlike gesture. He peered into my eyes as if studying me.

"Go home, Kay," he said, finally. "Forget this. Forgetting is easy. It's remembering that's hard."

"And if I don't?"

He shrugged.

"I think you can guess," he said.

He turned, and strolled off down the alley. His companions followed. I leaned up against the wall, noticing for the first time the graffiti on the building across the alleyway.

INSERT/DELETE

Victor Lazare maintained a small suite of offices in a new building in the business district. The reception area smelled of fresh paint. All the magazines on the coffee table were current.

I was shown through to Lazare's office. He sat at a big oak desk. There was not a scrap of paper on it.

He motioned for me to sit down.

Briefly, I recounted my inquiries to date, holding back only the part about Hertz's list. He listened impassively.

"And you now wish to give up the case?" he asked.

"I wish you to supply me with further information," I said. "I think

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you have been less than candid with me. I do not believe that I am now in possession of all the necessary facts."

"It is up to me to determine what facts are necessary," he said, sharply.

He appeared to muse.

"It would seem," he said, "that Walter Hertz is in rather more trouble than we believed. Perhaps there is a gambling debt at stake here, or some other form of illicit activity. That might explain Mr. Burns's interest."

"It might," I said, "yet I do not believe that it does. Not entirely, an any rate. And I am by no means certain as to your own interest in this affair."

"I have told you my interest. You do not believe me? You would rather take the word of radicals and criminals?"

"I would rather not," I said. "Yet you are leaving me little choice."

"You are afraid of this Burns."

"Yes," I said. "I don't deny that. But that is not what we are discussing."

"I see no point in discussing it further," Lazare said. "Please send me your bill. We are terminating your services."

"As you wish," I said.

I spent the remainder of the afternoon at the Bureau of Records, using the public access terminal to study the documents relating to Mr. and Mrs. Walter Hertz. They were entirely in order. Births, marriage, divorce papers, all were on file, the print-outs readily accessible. The Bureau, of course, did not keep original records.

I paid another visit on Marcia Tromb. She seemed annoyed to see me.

"I'm working," she said, as she led me into the living room. Through an open door, I could see a canvas propped up on an easel, another scene of raw nature, the sun beating down upon an empty beach beside a placid ocean. She pushed the door shut.

"I have been told to conclude my inquiries," I said. "I have been told that both by Victor Lazare and by a man called Hugo Burns."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I am not satisfied," I said. "I am not satisfied that I understand this situation."

"Is it necessary for you to understand the situation?"

"Who is Victor Lazare?" I asked.

"I told you, I don't know. I know only what he is not."

"Who does he work for? The government?"

"I don't know," she said, again.

"And Mrs. Hertz? Who is she?"

"A person claiming to be married to Walter Hertz."

"There are records confirming their relationship," I said.

"I would be surprised if there were not."

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"Who would fake those records?"

"Someone in a position to do so with a reason to do so. I could not say who that would be."

"You seem to take it for granted that such records can be faked. Was that Walter's job? Faking records?"

"As I told you, we didn't discuss his work."

"Does this mean anything to you?" I asked, showing her the copy of Hertz's list.

She glanced at the paper, handed it back.

"No," she said.

"It was taped behind your painting."

"I can hardly be held responsible for that."

"And Hugo Burns?" I asked. "Do you know him?"

"I've heard of him. I've never met him."

"Did Walter ever mention him?"

"Not that I recall."

"Why would Burns be interested in Walter?"

"I don't know."

"Why would Burns hide Walter? Why would Walter want to be hidden?"

"I don't know."

"What *can* you tell me?" I asked, frustrated.

"About what?"

"I don't know," I said.

I crossed to the window. Yet another graffito stared me in the face, on the wall of a warehouse across the street.

DREAM ON

I turned back to the woman.

"It's remembering that's hard," I said.

"What?"

"Something Burns said to me. You know, sometimes looking at the graffiti I get a funny feeling. Like there's something I forgot."

"That's why they rub it out," she said.

"They?"

"The people who don't want you to remember."

"The city works department?"

"I don't know who they are. I doubt it's the city works department."

"What is it?" I asked her. "What don't they want me to remember?"

"You wouldn't want to know."

"Did Walter Hertz remember?"

"Oh yes," she said. "He remembered all right."

She touched my arm, lightly.

"I'm sorry," she said.

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"Sorry about what?"

"All of it," she said.

I put my arm around her and drew her towards me. She came willingly. Later, in her bedroom, we made contact of a kind, beside her half-finished painting of the sun glaring down on an empty beach.

As I drove away from Marcia Tromb's apartment building, I passed an all-night doughnut restaurant, Do-Nite Garden. The name was somehow familiar. I recalled the paper cups in the parking garage at the Bureau of Records. I circled the block and parked in front.

I walked in and ordered a coffee. I sat at a table and sipped my coffee and looked around me. The place was almost empty. There was a bag lady two tables away, her shopping cart parked underneath the table, her bags on the seat opposite, writing in a cheap exercise book in an alphabet I did not recognize, perhaps one of her own device. And there were a couple of neighborhood kids playing the pinball machines, the electronic kind that beeped instead of ringing.

I crossed to the nearest of the kids playing the pinball machines.

"I'm looking for the people who do the graffiti," I said.

The kid did not look up from his game.

I took a ten out of my wallet and put it on the machine in front of him. He moved it to one side and continued to play.

When he had finished playing the ball he said, "They're not here." He picked up the bill and put it in his pocket and pushed the button for the next ball.

I put another ten on the table.

"Where?" I asked.

Again he brushed the bill to one side and went ahead with the play. Ten thousand points later he said, "They hang out underground. Off the main tunnels."

I stood there for a moment, watching the ball careen back and forth between the bumpers. Then I turned and left the restaurant and went to my car to get a flashlight.

There was an underground entrance down the block. The trains had shut down for the night. I climbed over the barrier and descended the stairs to the station. The station was dimly lit, the tunnels not at all. I followed the wall of the tunnel to the first branching point, then took a cutting off the main tunnel, shining my flashlight beam on the wall ahead of me as I walked.

There was much graffiti down here: paintings of fantastic animals and bizarre landscapes as well as written messages. Some of them were quite startling. Looking at them helped me keep my mind off the tunnel itself,

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which, with the water dripping on my face and the scufflings of small animals around my feet, was not exactly a pleasant place for a stroll.

As the tunnel curved around a bend, I heard voices murmuring in the distance. I turned the flashlight off and groped my way toward the sound. Light flickered up ahead. It came from two camping lanterns in a small alcove in the wall of the tunnel a hundred yards ahead of me. There were half a dozen people sitting around in this alcove, talking and drinking. I could hear fragments of their conversation, mainly a recitation of recent hits—where, how long, how much paint.

As I watched, the party began to break up. Two kids set off down the tunnel away from me. Two more came directly toward me. I found another alcove and ducked inside. When they had passed, I moved toward the lantern-lit alcove. There were two kids still there, discussing plans for tomorrow's campaign.

"Who writes the words?" I asked.

They looked up in surprise, trying to spot me through the glare of the lantern. I took a step closer, so that they could see the gun in my right hand.

"I said, who writes the words?"

"We do," said one of the kids, climbing to his feet. "Who's asking?"

"My name is Kay," I said. "I'm an inquiry agent. I want to know who writes the words."

The kid couldn't have been more than nineteen. He was dressed street punk, but somehow he didn't quite look the part. An art student, perhaps.

"Why?"

"Because there's something I have to remember."

The kid laughed at that. "And you think we know what it is?"

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe you only know what it isn't."

I felt an arm go round my neck, metal at my throat. Not cold metal. The kid behind me must have had the knife in his pocket.

"We know how to walk the tunnels," the kid in front of me said. "You don't."

An arm reached around and took the gun out of my hand and threw it over to the kid. He caught it and broke it open, removing the bullets.

"No need for guns," the kid said. "Power comes from the nozzle of a spraycan. What Raymond always says."

"Raymond writes the words?"

"I told you, we do. Raymond makes suggestions sometimes, but we all do our own stuff."

"He's your leader?"

"More of an editor, really."

"Does he buy the paint?"

"He helps out when he can."

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"I'd like to talk to him."

"Maybe you should."

He asked for my card, which he took and put in his pocket. Then he passed the gun back to me. They turned out the lanterns and took off, leaving me alone in the tunnel.

I drove across town to Victor Lazare's office building. I parked on the street and walked down the slope to the parking garage under the building. The garage door was shut, and the smaller door for pedestrians was locked. I forced it open.

I crossed the empty garage to the stairs at the back and climbed up to the next level. I found myself in a service corridor behind the main lobby. I looked around a door into the lobby. A security guard sat at a desk in front of a bank of monitors reading a newspaper. My entry had triggered no alarms.

I found the service elevator and took it up to Lazare's floor, emerging beside a washroom. The corridor was in darkness. Using my flashlight, I searched for Lazare's door. It was halfway up the corridor. It had the right suite number, but there was no name on the door. I was fairly sure there had been a name before. I wondered if I could be in the wrong building. I forced the door anyway.

The reception area still smelled of fresh paint. But all the furniture had gone. The inner office was just as empty. My client had apparently followed Walter Hertz into oblivion.

I drove by the house of Mrs. Walter Hertz. There were fresh tire marks in the snow on the driveway. There were no lights on. I walked up the path and stared through the front window. As I had somehow expected, the living room was empty of furniture. I went back to my car and drove home.

The next day I went back to the Bureau of Records and rechecked the files on Walter Hertz. They still existed, at least, but all reference to a wife had been removed.

There were no records for Victor Lazare of any kind.

I also checked the records on Marcia Tromb: birth certificate, wedding certificate, divorce papers, artist's license, and so on. I noted that she had been divorced two years before from one Richard Tromb, described as a professor of epidemiology. I found his file and scanned the picture attached to his teaching license. He looked to be an older man, perhaps in his late fifties.

I went back to my office and considered my options. I could sit around and wait for Raymond to call me, or I could continue looking for Walter Hertz. The two problems had somehow become linked in my mind; the

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missing memories and the missing person. If I could find one, I thought, I would find the other too.

I knew that Hugo Burns, among his many other activities, maintained a floating gaming operation in the Elvira Avenue district. Though illegal, this operation had developed a certain cachet with the city's elite, and games were even referred to in the social columns of the newspapers. Burns himself, described in these columns as the "well-known businessman," was frequently said to be in attendance.

A few phone calls to gambling acquaintances were sufficient to learn the location of that night's games. They were not a closely guarded secret. Clearly, Burns had arranged certain guarantees against police interference.

The games were in an apparently abandoned warehouse building in an alleyway behind Elvira Avenue. I watched for a while as limousines drew up, disgorging their well-dressed occupants as though to a night at the theater. Then I went in myself. The man at the door waved me up the stairs without a second glance.

Upstairs were two roulette tables and a dozen card games, spread out across almost the entire second floor. I sat down at one of the roulette tables, betting sporadically and losing steadily and scanning the crowd.

Hugo Burns made his entrance, flanked by his two companions of the previous day. He made his way toward the bar at the far end of the room, stopping here and there to shake hands and exchange pleasantries with his guests. I recognized at least one judge, and several members of the city council. Then he disappeared through a door behind the bar. His companions stationed themselves in front of the door.

I played and lost and continued to watch. Finally Burns came out again. He circled the room, trailed by his companions, greeting more of the players. And then he left.

I went to the bar and got a drink. When the bartender was looking the other way, I ducked behind the bar and into the room. It was sparsely furnished: a couch, a coffee table, a desk and chair, a computer terminal on the desk. A man was working at the terminal. He turned as I entered the room.

"Yes?" he asked, apparently irritated.

I recognized him from the picture I had seen at the Bureau of Records. It was Marcia Tromb's ex-husband, Richard.

"I'm looking for Hugo," I said, peering over his shoulder. There was a long list of names on the terminal. I didn't recognize any of them.

"He left," he said, turning back to the terminal.

"How about Walter?" I asked, conversationally.

* * *

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He looked back.

"Walter who?"

"Hertz," I said. "Walter Hertz. Marcia's buddy."

He reached, then, for the telephone. I grabbed his arm.

"You're the inquiry agent," he said. "The one Hugo told to stop inquiring."

"I didn't stop," I said.

"Too bad for you," he said.

"I see the connections," I said, "but I don't understand them. Marcia asks you to help hide Walter, and you ask Hugo Burns. What I don't understand is why Walter needs to hide or why Burns should help him."

"You don't understand anything," Tromb said.

"I thought you worked at the university," I said, indicating the terminal.

"I'm moonlighting," he said. "I owe Hugo a few favors."

"Maybe a few hundred thousand of them," I said. "Roulette?"

"Seven card high."

"What are you doing for him, anyway?"

"A little research. Epidemiological research. Analyzing patterns."

"What kind of patterns?"

"Patterns that interest Hugo. He has a very inquiring mind."

"And Hertz? How does he fit into the pattern?"

"You'll have to ask Hugo that."

"I think Hertz has information Burns wants, information Victor Lazare does not want anyone else to get hold of. About your pattern."

"I told you. You'll have to speak to Hugo."

"I already did," I said. "He was a lot of help."

I ripped out the phone cord and used it to tie Tromb to his chair, and stuck his sock in his mouth. Then I went back out and checked out my coat and hat and went home.

I drank a little and thought a lot. Then I went to sleep. Or tried to. I dozed in a kind of half-sleep, thoughts racing onwards.

The telephone woke me from this uneasy rest a little after four. A harsh whisper.

"Kay?" it said.

"Yes?"

"This is Raymond. You wanted to meet me?"

"Yes."

"The bus station. One hour." And then I was listening to a dead phone line.

The bus statio was out at the far end of D Street, past the Bureau of Records, way out at the city limits, almost the end of the world. It would

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not have been my own choice as a rendezvous, but I didn't seem to be making many choices of my own lately.

It was snowing heavily again as I set out for the bus station. By the time I got on to D Street, the buildings on either side of the road had vanished into a white haze and I could see perhaps five feet ahead of my car. I began to think that I was just going to keep on driving on that road forever. At last I saw the bus station looming up on the east side of the road.

I pulled into the parking lot and went inside, pausing at the door of the waiting room to peer through the glass. At this time of night, and in this weather, I had expected it to be deserted. Yet almost every seat was occupied.

I scanned the room, searching for my contact. One of the faces was oddly familiar.

"Hicks," I said.

The client who had lived in Hertz's building had been called Hicks, James Hicks. He had hired me to track down his daughter, from whom he had become estranged following the break-up of his marriage. I had never found her. Apparently she had left town. All this had been just six months before. Why had I forgotten it last night?

I entered the waiting room and crossed over to Hicks. He seemed to be deeply involved in an examination of the buttons on his jacket sleeve.

"Hello, Mr. Hicks," I said.

He looked up at me, apparently without recognition.

"I'm Joseph Kay," I said. "The inquiry agent. You hired me last year to look for your daughter, Diane."

"Diane?" he said. His face struggled between blankness and confusion. Blankness won.

"I'm sorry," he said, "you must have the wrong person."

"You're not James Hicks?"

Another brief flicker of confusion.

"No," he said, "I'm not."

"Then who are you?"

At this question, his face seemed to freeze up. He stared at me as if he did not see me at all, then returned to the examination of his jacket sleeve.

I crossed to the men's room and went inside. I filled a hand basin with cold water and held my face in it. It didn't seem to help.

There was something significant about Hicks, something quite apart from the fact that I had forgotten his name. I pulled the copy of Hertz's list out of my jacket and ran my finger down the page. There it was:

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"Hicks J.T." In the "D" column. It made no more sense to me now than it had before.

It was then that I looked up at the wall above the washroom mirror. And there I saw the same graffito that had been on the wall of the alleyway behind Elvira Avenue.

INSERT/DELETE

The paint on this one was still fresh. And this time I got it. "I" for insert, "D" for delete.

Insert, for example, McGee J.S. Delete Hicks J.T. And no doubt, before that, his daughter as well. That, presumably, was what Walter Hertz and his colleagues had done at the Bureau of Records. Insert, delete.

"Hello again, Joseph."

In the mirror I could see Marcia Tromb standing behind me. She was holding a gun, a small but sufficiently deadly looking gun.

"This is the men's washroom," I said. "The women's is down the hall."

"You have an appointment to keep."

"You're Raymond?" I asked.

"No," she said. "He sent me to get you."

"Why the gun?" I asked.

"I thought you should know which side I'm on."

"Not mine, then?"

"We'll have to see."

She motioned me out through the door, and down the corridor. We passed by the waiting room where the passengers waited for the bus that would take them out of town.

I thought about that, about Hicks J.T. and the rest of them getting on the bus and heading out . . . where? Where could they be going? I tried to think of a neighboring town. I could not think of a single one. And there was something else I couldn't remember, or had never known, something even worse.

"What town is this?" I asked. "What is it called?"

"I wish I could tell you," she said. "I'd like to know that, too."

I thought hard. And the harder I thought, the more I realized I didn't know.

"What country do we live in?"

"I don't know that either," she said.

"I don't remember ever being anywhere else," I said. "Yet there must be other towns, there must be countryside . . ."

"There must be," she agreed.

"Your paintings," I said. "What are they of?"

"I don't know," she said, again. "That was why I painted them. To try and remember."

We had reached the door of the bus station. She motioned me outside.

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The wind blew snow into my face. We circled around the building to the parking lot.

"The people in the waiting room. Where are they going?"

"We don't know that," she said. "But wherever it is, they won't come back."

"Deleted," I said, "by Walter Hertz."

"Hertz was just a minor functionary. He didn't know what he was really doing, never thought about it at all. Until he deleted his neighbor."

"Hicks," I said.

"Yes. Even then, he shouldn't have realized, shouldn't have broken through. But I'd been working on him for months. And he remembered. Not everything, of course, none of us do. But enough."

There was a limousine at the far end of the parking lot. We walked towards it.

"We're conditioned to forget," I said. "To forget even the questions."

"Yes."

"Who by?"

"We don't know."

We had reached the limousine. She motioned me inside. Hugo Burns was sitting on the back seat. Walter Hertz sat beside him.

"You were warned, Mr. Kay," Burns said.

"That's true," I said.

"Yet you persisted with your inquiries."

"Yes," I said.

"You must have been aware of the potential consequences."

I nodded.

"It's still possible," Burns said, "that we can come to some other arrangement. But first, I believe we have some other business. You wanted to see me?"

"You're Raymond?"

"Sometimes," he said.

I turned to Marcia. "And you work for him?"

"No," she said. "But he is useful to us."

"Marcia," Burns said, "is a member of a group of individuals interested in exploring and perhaps changing our situation here. Graffiti is one of their activities. Through my good friend Richard Tromb, I learned of this group and discovered that we have certain common interests. Subsequently I helped out where I could in channeling all that youthful energy. The graffiti is one avenue of attack. It helps some people to remember that they can't remember."

"Attack on what?"

"On whoever runs this little world of ours. Whoever is pulling the strings."

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"Lazare?" I asked.

"He's one of them, no doubt. His description fits the pattern. As far as we know, they don't live here. They come in from the outside from time to time to perform various tasks. You can spot them after awhile."

"Why do you care who runs things? You're doing all right."

"I make out," Burns admitted. "And yet I do not know where I am, or why I have been placed here. I can theorize, of course. Perhaps this place is some sort of penal colony, for example. Perhaps it is an asylum for the insane."

"Perhaps it's hell," Marcia said.

"Yes," Burns said. "Perhaps. Yet I would like to know all the same. And meanwhile, I must live my life knowing that no matter what I achieve, tomorrow I could be pulled out of here like that."

He snapped his fingers.

"And then it would be as if I was never here. Like Hicks J.T., for example, or any of the other names on your list. No one would remember me."

"I remember Hicks," I said.

"Now, yes. But not yesterday. And will you still remember him tomorrow? It's a great effort to remember. Sometimes I find myself forgetting things myself. That's another reason why I support the graffiti artists. To remind myself."

"How do they do it? Make us forget?"

"Probably conditioning of some sort, although we don't really know. We know very little about anything. Although thanks to Mr. Hertz, we know a great deal more than we did before. We have been able to tap into their computers, to track candidates for deletion, and to identify the bus station as their point of departure. He has assisted us greatly in our inquiries."

Hertz smiled vaguely in acknowledgement. Curiously enough, I was never to hear him speak.

"As to your own inquiries, Mr. Kay, I believe they are finally at an end. Are you pleased with yourself? Are you satisfied?"

"No," I said. "I tried to answer too many questions, to make too many connections. I find that my investigation can never be concluded."

"Perhaps it can."

He outlined his plan. It had the advantage of simplicity, if nothing else.

"There are others I could send, of course."

"I would go," Marcia agreed.

"Yet," Burns said, "I think you are the ideal candidate. Were you to remain here I would have no choice but to deal with you in the usual way. I have my reputation to protect, after all."

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"All right," I said. "I'll ride the bus."

I sat in the bus station, staring at a newspaper, not really seeing it. From time to time I looked around at those who would soon be traveling with me. If they caught my eyes, they looked back blankly. Except for Hicks. He seemed to be struggling to remember something and not succeeding.

Dawn was breaking outside as the bus finally pulled up, the doors opening with a hiss. We shuffled outside. I noticed that no one carried any luggage. The storm was over, it was a cold bright day. The passengers began to climb aboard. I glanced backwards, to the limousine still at the far end of the parking lot. And then I climbed up on the bus. The driver did not ask for a ticket.

Sitting there as the bus filled up, I felt a powerful compulsion to break and run. It was not, I think, just simple fear of what might await me out there. It was an almost physical need to remain in the city. I fought it off. Finally, the doors shut. The driver started the engine and pulled out on to D Street, heading out of the city. I stared out of the window.

The road stretched out ahead of us over a flat plain covered in snow. It ended, at the horizon, in a wall of mist. As we got closer, the mist seemed to thicken from moment to moment into an almost solid wall. The other passengers regarded this strange phenomenon incuriously.

The bus plunged into the mist, into complete darkness. I could not imagine how the driver could see where he was going. The lights came on inside the bus, and then quickly began to fade.

I turned in my seat to make some remark to the man sitting next to me. I saw that he, too, was beginning to fade. His body became insubstantial, then flickered away. All the passengers were vanishing around me. And then the bus, too, began to fade away.

I was left alone, crouching in total darkness. I could not even feel the ground under my feet, yet I had no sensation of falling.

I sensed that my investigation was almost at an end.

I waited, surprised that I did not go completely insane, wondering if I already was.

What seemed like a long time passed. Finally, Lazare came. I saw a tiny point of light in the great darkness. It expanded before me until I could see Lazare, sitting at a desk in front of me, in an office. It was a different office than the one I had visited him in before. I reached out to touch the desk, but my hand passed right through it.

"I'm not really here," Lazare said.

"Where is here?" I asked.

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"An interesting philosophical question," he said. "We'll leave it to one side for the moment."

"What's happening to me?" I asked.

"You went off the edge," he said. "The edge of your world. I told you to cease your inquiries, but you didn't listen. And now you must face the consequences."

"What consequences?"

"I'm not entirely sure," he said. "This has never happened before. We take people out all the time, of course, but this is the first time we've had one come out voluntarily."

"It wasn't entirely voluntarily," I said.

"And now," he said, "I suppose you want me to explain what this is all about. Actually, I don't owe you any explanation. And it couldn't possibly benefit you. In fact I don't know why I'm even talking to you. But go ahead."

"The city," I asked. "What is it? Some sort of a prison?"

He laughed.

"An asylum? Hell?"

He laughed some more. "Perhaps all of those things," he said, "although we see it a little differently. We see it as a program. Or rather, a series of interacting programs. There's no easy way to break this to you, Kay, but the fact is, you don't exactly exist. You're AI. An artificial intelligence. A program on one of our machines. You incorporate certain behavioral characteristics of a number of actual people, but you're not any of those people. You're a construct. So are all of the inhabitants of your little city. Constructs interacting with each other and with another program representing the city itself. Now tell me you don't believe it."

"I don't believe it."

"If you think about it for a moment, you'll realize that it's true."

I thought about it. I tried to resist it. Yet I did know that it was true. I knew what an "artificial intelligence" was, even though I could not recall ever encountering the concept. I knew about computers and expert systems and interfaces and all the rest of it.

"Why?" I asked, finally. "What's the purpose of all this?"

"The city is a simulated social system," he said. "We're using it to study social behavior, among other things. Or at least, that's our intention. We're still pretty much at the start-up stage right now. It may seem like you've been there forever, but actually it's been just over a year. We have a lot of studies planned."

"Advertising?" I asked.

"Eventually, no doubt. But it's the military paying the bills right now, and they want to know about various types of civilian behavior. Spread

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of rumors, compliance with regulations, reliability of social control mechanisms, and so forth."

"In a controlled environment."

Lazare nodded. "You knew it all along. But you weren't supposed to be able to access it. You weren't supposed to know anything at all. Spoils the simulation, of course."

"Of course," I agreed.

"I suppose we got a little too creative. Transferred a little too much individuality to our constructs. And despite all the gates and rings and censor mechanisms, it started to go wrong. What you might call a return of the repressed. Somehow, the actors started to realize they were on the stage. And then Hertz disappeared, which was something we had never figured on happening."

"I don't understand," I said, "how you could lose him. How could he hide from you in your own program?"

"It's a very complex system. We don't keep track of every element in it at once. We don't have to, normally; we're looking at aggregate behavior. When Hertz broke out of his routines, there was no easy way to find him. Sure, we could have just pulled the program, but we wanted to know what was going on."

"So you entered the simulation and you hired me."

"And you led me to Burns, which would have been enough to take us to Hertz. But you wouldn't stop inquiring. I guess we built in too powerful a tropism. And then you decided to climb on the bus."

"Why the bus?" I asked. "I don't get it."

"Another excess of creativity," Lazare said. "It's the exit mechanism. We're constantly fine-tuning the social mix, taking out some actors and putting in others, and we keep the system internally consistent. We block out memories of them among those who remain, we adjust the city records, we take them out on a bus. It's just a metaphor, but we thought it was sort of a nice touch. We never imagined that anyone else would be able to ride it out."

"What now?" I asked.

Lazare sighed.

"Basically, it's a mess. I suppose what's happening in there right now is sort of interesting, but it's not what we wanted to study. So now, I think, we close down the system for a little while, and try and figure out what went wrong. We may remove or modify the problem constructs, like Burns and the Trombs and yourself, or we may just try to build in more effective blocks. And then we try again."

"What happens when you shut down?" I asked. "To us?"

"You remain on file," he said, "until we make a decision in your case, but all intra-system interactions are suspended. Presumably, any sense

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of consciousness is suspended as well, although I'm not sure that's the appropriate word in any case. As I said, you don't exactly exist at all, although of course you feel that you do."

"When?" I asked. "When do you close down?"

He looked at his watch.

"It's nearly lunchtime," he said. "I'll call a meeting for this afternoon. If I can get approval then, we'll shut down before the end of the day. If not, then a day or two at most. Why do you ask?"

"I want to go back."

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess there are some people I'd like to say goodbye to, even if they're not really people."

He considered.

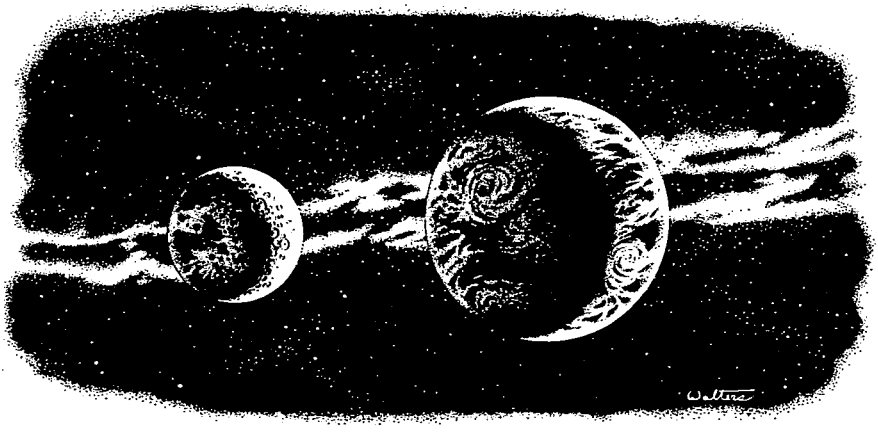
"I don't see that it'll do any harm," he said, "at this point. I don't see that it'll do any good either."

"I'd like to go back," I said.

He nodded. And then, with no sense of transition, I was sitting in the back of an empty bus, watching the driver pull into the bus station.

According to my watch, only a few minutes had elapsed since I had climbed on the bus. The limousine was still in the parking lot. I trudged towards it through the snow.

I bring you the news from D Street. The news is not good. The news is very bad. ●



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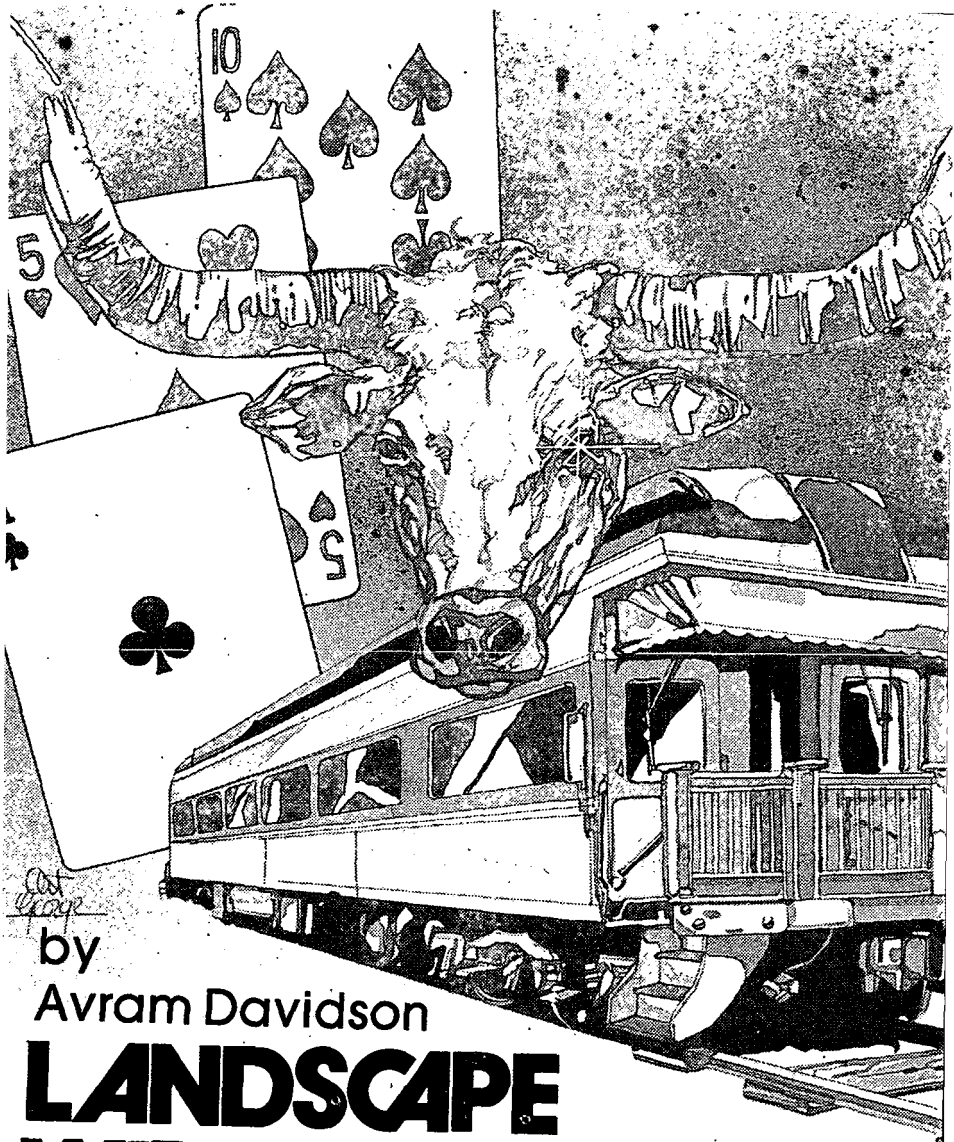

by
Avram Davidson

LANDSCAPE WITH GIANT BISON

art: Arthur George

A train ride through the Pliocene with Avram Davidson is bound to have its share of unexpected delights and unusual snags.

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Strictly speaking it was not a trolley car for there was neither overhead wire nor sub-level trench, nor could there have been: car and track were miracle enough. At intervals there was a depot and the controlman, Robert Haas, slid the two ready-to-go-spent batteries out through their port-holes and into the wind-charger, but did not wait till they were recharged. Two more were ready, and slipped in where the others had been. Onward. There had been problems in the Triassic; once a tyrannasaur had charged the wind-vane and there was neither Quixote nor Panza to do anything about that. The blades had not been made to withstand it. Also the earth was not yet firm and the tracks were sometimes rippled and wrenched for miles. Then too the work-crews had not performed well in the Triassic. Astonishing how many had gone mad, with all resultant problems. So the Triassic Line had been reluctantly canceled.

Things went much better in the Pleistocene. Sometimes an entire day might go by without even a mammoth attacking the big red car, and when one sometimes, only rarely, did, the bell usually made it swerve off; if not, the hooter always did so. Robert Haas dinged the bell to attract attention, announced, "Cataract Sixty-seven is our next stop, folks. Cataract Sixty-seven . . ." Far off in the distance a cloud of dust caught his eye. "I see there may be, just may be, giant bison crossing the track about five miles up ahead. Well, we'll see. If we're held up by them, the candy butcher has sandwiches, root beer, and ginger ale." He fell silent. The passengers being rather tired, there were no questions. A wooly rhino appeared out of nowhere on the right side of the track, its red hide caked with mud and dust, and paced the car for two miles; then it slackened and turned away, was lost to sight.

A cloud of dust? Smoke?

One year the Turghaghulor, a people whom only animal cunning saved from near-idiocy, who by slow drift down the land had come to the embanked track, did not even recognize it as something out of the way of nature: finding a convenient bare-spot, a convenient raised-place, they had laboriously piled wood upon rails and ties alike and blew upon their firesticks . . . the Turghaghulor cannot kindle fire with either rub-wood or strike-stone . . . roasted what small game they had caught alive, and what carrion they had managed to wrest from the grasp of larger creatures. No one ever saw a Turghaghu kindle fire and no one ever saw a Turghaghu put fire out; this fire burned for days and it was days before the damage could be repaired. So far as was known those microcephaloi had never yet encountered one of the big red cars moving along the track; had they done so, be sure they might have taken it for a mastodon or the like and tried in their shambling way to lure it into a swamp or off a cliff so they might more easily kill it and eat it.

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Wild two-toed horses galloped alongside, picked up speed as the car slowed down a bit, jumped the track just in front, were gone. Immense giraffes with their rocking-horse gate racked along. Hills appeared, black eye holes in them, white threads rising. Robert Haas dinged the bell. "Way back to the right, folks, those are the West Trog Hills' first outcropping, you see that the Frimdhadhulor have observed the steam from Cooky Joe's caboose, so they are sending back their signal to us. So we like to say, anyway, but it's almost certain they are signaling to other Frimdhadhulor up ahead. There's a place before we get to Cataract Sixty-seven that's dedicated to the Mute Trade, the Dumb Trade or Silent Swap. The Car Company traditionally allows us to stop a bit and anyone who wants to set out items of small value can do so; coming back you'll be able to see what the Frimdha have put down next to each item and what they are willing to give for it. We suggest you be content with whatever it is." He did not voice aloud a silent prayer that there be no repetition of the incident in which a cracked cup with bluebells painted on the side had been paired with a very well smoke-dried, very dead old woman.

Robert Haas had a blood brother, a Frimdhadhu. Somewhere. He knew that in the mouth of one of those caves people were holding up babies to see the distant steam-vapor, exposing arm-pits which had never been kissed by razors. Whenever, which was not often, they found a suitable bathing place, the Frims bathed, thus revealing themselves to be White and tow-headed; most of the time, they, too, like the red wooly rhino, had hides caked with mud and dust. A suitable place was not easily come by. It had to be deep enough at least to sit in, and devoid of any alarmingly fast currents: the Frimdhadhulor did not swim.

The Frimdhadhulor did not swim and thought that only critters could swim. *All* such critters they called *Fish*. The immense otters sometimes seen were *Fishdogs*, and there were also *Fishbirds*. Once they saw in the middle of a lake creatures very much like men and women, they had red hair some of them and black hair some of them and were probably an outloping band of the Brunghughulor. The Frimdhadhulor did not, however, refer to them as Brunghughulor; they called them *Fishfolk*. Scores of thousands of years later their descendants spoke of mermaid and merman. Robert Haas heard voices raised just a bit and thinking that perhaps a question had been asked of him turned around. What he saw was no questioning face but a mild ad hoc celebration; a card-game had been unexpectedly won.

Giant ground-sloths ambled slowly along, a cave-bear, unusually far down into the lowlands, reared up to its immense, incredible height, roared defiance at the car; made, fortunately, no move to attack it. The cloud of dust, at last. Sure enough! Giant bison! They had crossed the

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track, all, all. Well, all but one. A vast old bull-bison, no longer able to get cows for his harem, outcast, ugly, rogue, probably bad teeth and trouble with both grazing and chewing, head bowed, beard almost in the dust; fleece shabby and peely, hump flabby and saggy, horns—ah, those horns!—ah, those horns!

And—right in the middle of the track!—the huge old bull paused and began to piss. Robert Haas slowed, slowed, dinged the bell gently: like a flash the old rearguardsman-bison giant turned and charged straight up the tracks, straight towards the car. With Haas now decision was instant. The car surged forward at increasing speed, the hooter howled, the bull did not exactly give way altogether but he seemed to lurch off center, gigantic head sweeping from side to side seeking to see this new enemy—the bull lurched, slipped, had almost regained himself when the car struck him between the shoulder and the brisket: he went up, he went down, he went over, kicking hugely, lay still. Still, there, there, in the middle of the Pleistocene—

Again, voices, a voice. Louder, closer, it was the winner of the card-game, holding out a hand, not alone his own hand and its five fingers but a handful of cards. Evidently the winning hand in the game just won. "There!" cried the man. "There! There! Look at that! Was that worth coming on this trip for? Eh? Hey? What do *you* say? Oh boy! *Worth* it? What do *you* think? Would *you* kick up your heels? What would *you* do?"

Robert Haas thought he would sigh.

Then he dinged the bell again. ●

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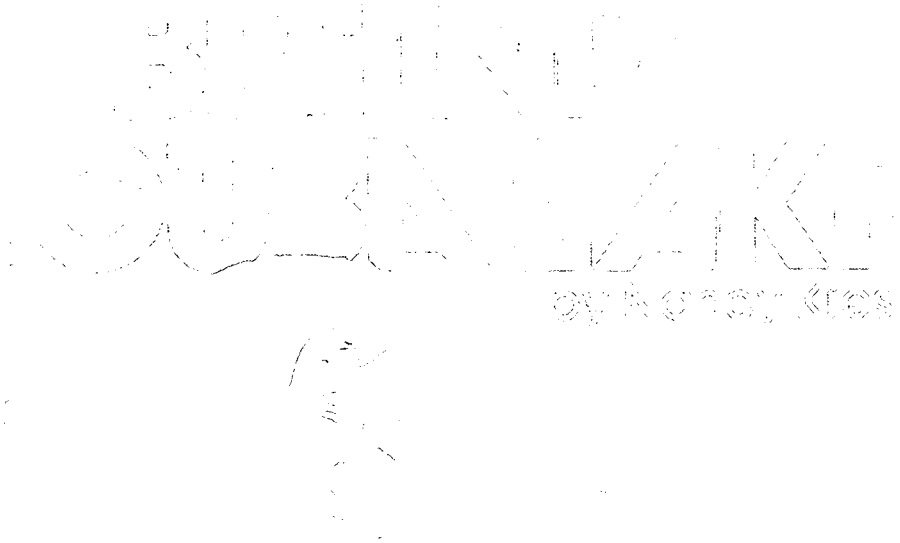

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When Jane finished reading the letter for the third time, she picked up the phone. Anger bubbled up through her like bad champagne, heady and perversely sweet. One hundred twenty miles away, Nick answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"This is Jane. I got your letter."

"Jane . . ."

"Yeah, Jane. You remember me. It was a lovely letter, Nick. Chatty and friendly and sweet."

Silence.

"It was really lovely to hear such great detail about the remodeling of your garage."

He said, very quietly, "Don't, Jane."

"Don't what?" she said automatically, before his quietness hit her. Then it did. This was Wednesday.

"Your wife is home."

"Yes."

Non-commital, neutral. Was the woman in the same *room?* "You can't talk."

"No."

" 'Yes,' 'No'—What are you pretending, that I'm a fucking *construction client?"*

In his silence, Jane heard that he was doing just that. Tears bit her eyes. She moved to slam down the phone, stopping herself at the last possible moment before the receiver smashed into the erect double buttons.

"I'm coming down there, Nick. Tonight, after my evening class. I'll be there by 11:30. Meet me at the bar, and you damn well better be there this time, I swear it. I have to talk to you. If you're not there, I'll come to your house and ring the bell and talk to you there."

She didn't wait for Nick's answer but she heard part of it anyway, while the receiver was on its way down: "Wait, tonight isn't—" The words already sounded tinny with distance, ghostly with loss.

She knew she was a better teacher when she was angry, was perhaps even at her best then. Even Freshman Composition sat up straight in its chairs, stopped doodling in its collective margins. During Romantic and Victorian Poetry, Jane sparkled with irony, grew passionate with the sort of literary scorn that impresses graduate students. Her notes strode across the board in a forceful hand she scarcely recognized as her own. The better students' eyes took on that thoughtful look that was at once public reward and a kind of private, sly seduction.

Not tonight, chickies. Sorry. Teacher has a headache.

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Jane let them go at 8:45, fifteen minutes early, knowing she would need the time to peel them both off Wordsworth and off her, and escape to the car. By 9:02 she was pulling away from the campus, the lights of the high-rise dorms shining in her rear-view mirror in erratic patterns like some indecipherable message from the sky itself. The October night was cold, desolately beautiful. She could feel her anger begin to slide away; she whipped it up again, afraid to feel what might take its place.

Dear Nick,

Don't write me, not even about the fascinating progress in remodeling your garage. I'll just have to live without finding out how much the insulation exceeds federal energy specifications. Don't write me; don't call me, don't try to drive up and walk into one of my classes—

Fat chance.

She was crying again. *Fuck it.* She swiped at her eyes with a Kleenex, hunkered down over the wheel like a bad parody of a race car driver, and concentrated on the road. One hundred twenty miles south through the Allegheny foothills and over the border into Pennsylvania, the last section expressway but the rest New York State Route 19 south through decaying small towns and comatose cabbage farms. Two and a half hours, if it didn't rain. In two and a half hours she would slide into a booth in a roadside bar across from Nick and say . . . what?

Don't call me, don't write me . . .

Fat chance.

Not tonight, chickies. Teacher has a heartache.

She lost Route 19 at Pike, without at first realizing it. Clouds had rolled in from the west, and there were no street lights except for the sole traffic light at the sole major crossroads of Pike itself. On campus, life went on twenty-four hours; this empty blackness, mile after mile of it broken only by an isolated farmhouse and her own headlights, was at first unsettling and then calming. Beyond the spectral sweep of her high beams lay sullen hills, sensed rather than seen even when the road rose and fell between them.

Jane rolled down the window. The air smelled of late autumn bitterness, wet leaves and wetter earth, violated out of season for the planting of winter wheat. Plows behind yellow tractors biting the ground. There would be thick raw furrows, naked without snow.

Twenty minutes past Pike, Jane knew she was lost. No more farmhouses, no more winter wheat, just dense woods crowding close to the road, which seemed to have shrunk. Jane scowled into blackness. *Let*

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there be a roadsign. And lo, there were roadsigns! It's a miracle, she's cured, she can . . . she can read again!

There was no roadsign.

A hundred feet, a quarter mile, a half mile more of nothing but sullen void. Even the trees had retreated back from the shoulder of the road. When she pulled over to consult a map, the quality of the silence startled her with its velvet indifference, its country blackness.

My dear Nicholas,

Am writing this from the depths of nature, where I have gone to experience the fullness of the land and my own inner self, a Wordsworthian sentiment your pretty and illiterate little wife is incapable of feeling. Please forgive the turds smeared on the back of this birchbark. They are not a personal message but rather a social statement as writing paper has come to seem a desecration of living timber which might provoke the ancient sleeping forces to retaliate—

The map was only limited help. The last landmark she remembered was Pike, where she must have missed the way Route 19 abruptly twisted southeast and instead had taken some branching local road. But the map, a gift from Mobil Oil, showed only main routes, and Jane had no idea in which direction she had branched, or if she had done so more than once. It was so damn dark . . .

She could either retrace her route north back to Pike, or forge on ahead. She had come maybe ten miles off 19—retracing would lose her another fifteen or twenty minutes. Since she had not twisted east when 19 did, she was probably still heading south, and if that were so she ought to be able to keep going until she rejoined 19, or else came directly to the Expressway at some point or other. The Expressway ran east and west; if she drove south long enough, she would *have* to come to it.

On impulse, Jane twisted the door handle. Outside the car, the darkness seemed even more furry, soft in the way heaps of banked ashes are soft, with the underlying sense of something alive, mute but not extinguished. She could not remember the last time she had stood alone this deep in wooded countryside. Maybe she never had. There was no sound, not even insects. Was it too late in the year for insects, were they all dead? When in the fall did insects die? What if the car broke down out here?

Inside, she rolled up the window as tight as it would go. Three miles down the twisting road, just when she was beginning to eye panic warily, as if it were a potentially dangerous student, she saw the glow of curious green lights through the trees. Green, surrounding a red and glowing blob.

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She had met Nick a year ago. As part of a Faculty Exchange Program that had started mostly because there was State Arts Council money to start it, the community college in Pennsylvania had requested a guest lecture on World War I poet Siegfried Sassoon, and Jane had lost the political tussle not to go deliver it. Why Siegfried Sassoon? She never found out.

Nick had sat in the second row, a big glum man with gray in his dark beard and the serious tan of a man who worked outdoors. Throughout the lecture he scribbled dutifully in a notebook, asking no questions and showing no real interest in Sassoon's sing-song and bitter pacificism. Nonetheless, Jane found herself aware of him throughout, and when he came up to her in the coffee hour afterward, she put on her best can-I-help-you-understand-some-point bullshit smile, slightly curious to hear what this aging undergraduate would ask. But she hadn't been prepared for what he did say.

"It's gone, you know. All that Georgian anguish over war, and then all that sixties pacifism. The men I know who didn't go to Nam wish they had."

Jane froze. Stupidly—later she would see it had been stupidly, had given him some early indefinable advantage she never regained—she said, "No, they don't."

He smiled. "Afraid so. Me, too. We missed something."

"Missed?"

He looked at her more closely, and his expression shifted.

"Missed?" She heard her own voice, scaling slightly upward, the acceptable contempt not quite enough to cover the unacceptable panic. "I lost a brother in Vietnam. The men you know must be fools, or bastards, or both!"

His glumness seemed to deepen, settle over him like a mist, out of which his eyes watched her with the first hint she had of his astonishing ability to turn an attack into an occasion for reassurance. "Oh yes, they are that. All of us. Both."

Jane had found herself grinning: coldly, reluctantly, her anger not completely gone. It was a strange sensation; the skin around her mouth tingled with it. She had raised her eyes to his, all glum compassion, and the dreary room had suddenly seemed too bright, full of glare and sunshine, hot with possibility.

The greenish light turned out to be Christmas tree lights, half of them broken into jagged ovals, circling a window with a red COCA-COLA sign. Even in the dark, Jane could see the wooden store was unpainted. Gutters sagged below the roof line. She parked her Chevette next to the

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biggest pick-up truck she had ever seen, a monstrousity painted screaming yellow, and took the keys out of her ignition. To grasp the doorknob she had to reach through the soft worn ribbons of a screen door.

Inside, there were high half-empty shelves, one littered with the dusty yellow fallout from a bag of corn chips. Three people stood under a dim bulb, arguing fiercely. None of them looked at Jane.

"—paid last week, the full damn amount—"

"Like hell you did!"

"Like hell I didn't, Emma—"

"Excuse me," Jane said. The three looked up, annoyed. Uneasiness nibbled at Jane.

The woman—Emma—was huge, middle-aged muscle gone to fat stuffed into jeans and sweatshirt balanced over surprisingly small—even dainty—feet in Western boots. The boy, a gum-chewing ten or eleven, she would have passed a dozen times without noticing. But no one could not notice the man, if only because he matched the store too perfectly. In another setting Jane would have found him fascinating; in this one he seemed to her the creation of one of her second-rate students, a stale literary contrivance. Scrabbly-haired, wild-eyed, bearded, his knobby frame dressed in torn overalls and a dirty sheepskin-lined jacket.

"I'm lost," Jane said. "I'm trying to get back on Route 19, and I think I turned off it at Pike. What's the fastest way to pick it up south of here?"

The three stared blankly.

"Route 19," Jane repeated, more loudly. Were they all feeble? Rural inbreeding, exhausted chromosomes.

They went on staring. Then the woman stepped forward, a half-step in her delicate leather boots.

"Can't get there from here."

Exasperation flooded Jane, washing out her momentary uneasiness. "Of course you can get there from here—I just *was* there. I left Route 19 at Pike and now I could just drive back the way I came, but I thought there might be a faster way to rejoin 19 farther south. I'm heading for Pennsylvania."

"Can't get there from here," the woman said. Her voice had changed, gone curiously gentle.

The wild man said, "She can go by down behind Cuba Lake."

The boy stopped chewing gum. The woman whipped around her huge body to turn on the man. "Down behind Cuba Lake! I'd like to see her try to go down behind Cuba Lake, you big fool! She'd get lost on them back roads before she knew it!"

"Huh," the man said, and there the discussion stopped. Man and woman glared at each other, Jane apparently forgotten. Their fury was inexplicable to her, but obviously unconnected to getting back to Route 19. She

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scanned the Mobil map. There were numerous tiny splotches of blue, most of them unlabeled.

"Which one is Cuba Lake?"

Everyone ignored her.

"Look," Jane said, "I'll just retrace the route I came. Thanks anyway." She turned to the door.

"Wait," the man said. He stepped closer; she smelled fetid whiskey on his breath. "There's a faster way. You just follow me half a mile. Then the road splits in three, I'll pull over and get out and show you which way to go. It goes on a ways, put you back on a main road that hooks into 19 south of Oramel."

Jane looked at him. At the edge of his flannel collar, a roll of gray flesh worked up and down.

"No, thanks. It'll probably be simpler to just drive back to Pike."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"Hold still a minute," the woman said sharply. She took the map, not asking first, from Jane's hand and studied it. "Lose you half an hour. Maybe more. Yeah—more."

More. And she had already lost time—she wouldn't get to Nick before 1:00 a.m. The bar would be deserted if it were open at all, the lights long since out behind Nick's Austrian pines.

"She can't even get down behind Cuba Lake," the woman said, still studying Jane's map. Her voice held a curious mixture of triumph and pique. Pique—that was reassuring, wasn't it? Pique wasn't an emotion that went with condoning a set-up for crime. "Not on that split."

"Huh," the man repeated. He raised one scrawny leg and stood balanced on the other like some extinct waterfowl, yellowed teeth chewing on his bottom lip and eyes gone inward. He looked so bizarre that Jane was suddenly sick of both of them, suddenly longed for the slick normality of a Safe-way. Clean plastic, college kids buying chips and beer, housewives with whining kids. An hour and a half.

"Look," she said with sudden decision, "when the road splits in three, which one do I take? Left, right, or middle?" She watched not the man but the woman, searching for some sign of complicity, some shifting of eyes or muscles that would map the woman as knowing him capable of . . . whatever. She didn't find it.

"Left," the man said. "But you could miss it, the middle curves a trick left too. I'll stop, get out, show you."

"Just honk," Jane said. "Honk at the split and I'll find it." She was still watching the woman, who showed only annoyance at having her opinion ignored. At the edge of her vision the man, still on one foot, nodded.

"Okay. I honk, you bear far left. Come on, boy."

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Outside, the boy climbed into the cab of the huge yellow pick-up. Jane felt further reassured. It didn't seem likely a man bent on rape or robbery would bring along a child, did it? She locked her car doors and started the engine.

The road seemed even darker, more desolate than before. Jane's high beams glared off the rear of the pick-up. Despite herself, she peered at the window: no gun rack.

Dear Nick,

Literary models, like Newtonian physics, cause equal and opposite reactions. Put it in your course notes. I start to love you because you say something so outrageous that you can't possibly mean it. I follow a hillbilly derelict because he looks so much like a crazed killer that he can't possibly be one. The world is not that anthropomorphic, except in bad novels, which I've been reading a lot of lately in a stupid effort to not think about you—

The pick-up honked, slowed, and veered right. Jane caught her breath, unexpectedly panicked that it had after all been some sort of trap, that the man would shoot out her tires or follow her down what would turn out to be a deserted dead end. "Dead end" . . . who the hell coined these metaphors?

The yellow truck honked a second time and picked up speed, disappearing around a bend. Jane pushed her foot to the floor. Pebbles clattered against the underside of the Chevette. She slowed down, angry at herself: even if there were some sort of cut-off and the yellow truck suddenly bore down on her, it wouldn't help to be piled up against the dark woods.

Crouched over the wheel, she strained to see the twists and turns of the dirt road. Her high beams were unaccountably focused too high; they showed clearly the undersides of leaves clawing at each other from opposite sides of the road.

A few miles after the fork, the road ended.

First it climbed an abrupt rise, which descended even more abruptly. Jane's headlights, now pointed down, shimmered over a flat blackness. She slammed on the brakes and skidded, stopping inches from the water's edge.

Panic gripped her. Mud—the bank could be soft mud, cars sank in mud and then the pressure kept the doors from being opened from the inside—

Flinging open the door, Jane hurled herself out of the car and clambered back up the rise. Her heart slammed in her chest as she stood looking down on the smooth top of the Chevette, still shining its lights out over the lake.

Minutes passed. The top did not move. When Jane finally crept back down the slope, she tested the ground with each step. It held firm. Cau-

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tiously she reached into the car for her purse and pulled out a penlight. Hard ground, covered with tough weeds, extended clear to the water's edge. Beyond, the lake sighed softly. A breeze sprang up; the surface rippled like black muscle.

Cuba Lake?

In her haste at the triple fork, she must not have veered far enough left, and so had ended up on the middle road. The man had said . . . the man . . .

Jane scrambled back into the car, slammed the door, and switched off both headlights and flashlight. But after a moment anger began to burn away fear. She yanked the key to the right and began to back up the rise. Her beams again pointed down onto the lake, and for a moment it seemed something moved over the surface, far from shore. Jane turned her head back over her shoulder and tried to stay out of the underbrush.

At the top of the rise she did a three-point turn in seven points, then barreled back under the leaves that were like dark hands.

Nick—

I do not believe in ancient terrors stirring to life in the menacing countryside, shaping the lives of men as in some modern horror novel, any more than I believe in ancient benevolence stirring to life in the pastoral countryside as in the sentimental Romantic poets you unaccountably love so much—

Poets. What was she doing in possibly mortal danger, thinking about *poets? Nick, Nick, you corrupted me, my dissertation was on Zola—stay on the road, Jane you idiot, it turns here—*

Beyond the turn, the yellow pick-up blocked the road.

It was positioned with hood touching the dense trees on one side of the road, rear bumper on the other. There was no way around. Jane peered at the truck, one hand frozen halfway in the act of hitting the lights. The yellow cab seemed empty.

Then where was he, where were they . . . the boy, too—

Nick—

Carefully, fingers trembling on the wheel, she backed the car through the overhanging trees. A hundred yards before the turn, there had been a gap in the woods, something that might have been the remnant of another dirt track. If it angled upward, it might bypass the occupants of the pick-up, wherever they were.

She found the track, choked with weeds at its beginning but becoming surprisingly clear as she pushed along it. At one point Jane had the eerie

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sensation that she was driving on fresh asphalt, not dirt. The road seemed to neither curve back towards the lake not to angle upwards—until it precipitately descended and Jane was again staring at the dark water of the lake.

She hit the brakes, stopped just short of the bank, and laid her forehead against the cold plastic of the steering wheel.

In her headlights, something dark moved over the water.

She tried to pull herself together, to think rationally. Of course all the dirt tracks would lead back to the lake; the lake was probably where everyone—or such "everyone" as there was around here—wanted to go. Kids fishing. Hunters out after deer. Lovers looking for a lane.

She resisted the impulse to open the car door and let the penlight search for used condoms.

This time there was room to turn the Chevette around by the water's edge, a wide shelf of weedy ground that nonetheless left her shaking each time the wheels approached the bank. The shaking made her inch up the rise, and so she was going slow enough to notice the nearly-hidden fork at the top. On the right, the clear road she had come down; on the left, a weed-choked path.

She turned left. The path, wherever else it took her, headed away from the yellow truck. And after a hundred yards, it was even easier to drive on than the previous road. Caught between curiosity and dread, Jane stopped the car, opened the door just wide enough to take the width of the penlight, and shined it straight down.

Asphalt.

As she again drove forward, a sudden giddiness seized her. She even laughed out loud, a sound so high and abrupt that it made her shake her head ruefully. The car shimmied lightly.

Dear Nicky,

You my love are a fool to prefer your domestic little wife to a woman who can—single-handedly! yes!—defeat a mad hillbilly rapist AND a child-midget murderer AND—not to mention!—the dark forces rising from the gaseous swamps to ooze around the souls of the sinful, a group for which you and I definitely qualify. A pioneer of femininity, hacking her way through this slightly banal underbrush while your—

Ahead, the pick-up blocked the road.

Jane cried out. This time she nearly smashed into the passenger side of the cab before she was able to make her foot hit the brake. The tires squealed, laying rubber. Scabs of scrofulous yellow paint loomed at her.

There was no sound. After unbearable moments of dark silence, Jane

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leaned into the horn. Thin blatting leaked out into the thick air, was absorbed by it as by soggy wool. No one came.

The truck could not be there. There hadn't been time, the road beyond angled even farther to the left, even farther away from where the pick-up had been parked before. It could not be there. It could not.

Shaking, Jane studied the truck. The front bumper was jammed against an outcropping of New England granite. But between the rear bumper and the trunk of a pulpy-looking tree Jane couldn't identify, was a gap that might be just large enough to ease the Chevette through. Or might not.

And if there *was* someone hunkered down in the yellow cab—someone small, a child—who reached up to turn on the ignition, to pull the clutch into reverse, to lean with both hands on the accelerator as the Chevy was easing through the gap, the pick-up would easily crush the passenger door. Would that make it easier or harder for someone to get inside? If the pick-up kept on crushing, would it twist the steering wheel into her chest?

She could back up again, look for yet another side road. But this time she had been watching; there were no more side roads. Behind her was only the lake.

For a long moment Jane squeezed shut her eyes, opening them only when the images inside the lids became worse than the one outside. Carefully she edged the Chevy toward the rear of the pick-up.

The right door handle caught the bottom edge of the bumper, scraping a bright gash in the dirty chrome. On the driver's side, bark smeared across the window. Once off the asphalt, the Chevette sank a few inches into loam and rotten leaves, and there was a moment where Jane thought it would not continue to move forward. But it did.

Clear of the truck, Jane accelerated wildly. Four hundred yards down the road the trees suddenly withdrew and she was flying past flat fields, empty as deserts. The rear view mirror revealed the pick-up still motionless, still solitary.

A drink—what she would give for a Jack Daniels, how late did Pennsylvania bars serve . . .

Her watch said 10:03.

Shocked, Jane slowed the car. That wasn't possible. She had left Pike perhaps an hour ago, at roughly 10:00. There was no way it could be that early—

Directly ahead, her high beams skimmed out over water.

She stopped at the water's edge, the road behind her both flat and straight, stretching like a plumb line to where she had left Cuba Lake receding in the other direction.

Another lake . . .

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But she knew it was not. Even as she watched numbly through the windshield still spattered with leaves and pulpy bark, something spectral moved over the distant surface.

Wearily, with muscles that no longer seemed her own, Jane opened the door and walked towards the water. She sat at its very edge, knees clasped to her chest, tough weeds rustling under her weight and pressing their shapes through the wool of her slacks. It no longer seemed to matter whether she protected herself by staying in the car; whether she tried another road; whether she tried at all. There was no other road. There was only the yellow pick-up and the derelict with gray in his dark beard and the black thing over the water, and all roads led to Cuba Lake.

"You can't get there from here."

Dispassionately, with the curious clarity that comes from having worn out all emotion, Jane studied the darkness moving over the water. A kind of mist, without form, neither rising from the lake nor descending from the sky. *"And darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." Breshith, en arkhei, Beginning,* Jane thought and, despite herself, smiled jeeringly. A professor to the last. The quotation created the reality.

Dear Nick,

Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man—

Nick . . .

Her purse was in her hand, although she didn't remember carrying it from the car. On impulse, eyes still hopeless on the dark lake, she fumbled among the make-up and wallet and glasses case for his letter. When she held it again, lukewarm colorless tasteless hemlock on sixteen-pound bond, anguish pierced her so sharply that she bent her head over her raised knees and rested it there. She thought it would be helpful to cry, thought it in just those detached pop-theory bullshit words: "It would be helpful, Jane, to cry." But she knew she wouldn't. The thought of the echoes of sobs returning to her from across that lake—that alone would have been enough to stop her.

A long time later she released the straining clasp around her knees and lay, exhausted, on her back. The sky above was featureless. Jane stared at it, equally empty. She stared until the gray blank might have been either miles or inches above her eyes. Until the boundary between the flat void of the sky and her skull disappeared. Until her clothing was soaked with dew and her fingers so chilled they would not open around Nick's letter.

It took that long.

Her watch said 10:03.

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Eventually, Jane rose, staggering on numb legs. She got into the car and started back along the flat, perfectly straight road. Glancing in the rear view mirror she saw, as she knew she would, the surface of the water empty behind her. After a few miles, the road roughened, swerved, and joined New York State Route 19. A little farther along, road signs re-appeared; farther still, she came to a caution light, blinking like a single yellow eye.

Dear Nick,
Not Wordsworth, not Byron, not even Stephen King. They all had it backwards. We *shape* it.

Just before Pike, halted at a barren intersection, Jane rolled down the car window. The crumpled paper arced over the dirt shoulder and into an unseen ditch. There was the faint splash of water. Driving only slightly faster than the speed limit, she was able to glimpse the last light in Lehman Science Hall before whoever was still up there working winked it off.

Dear Nick,
But not each other.

Her watch said 11:30. ●

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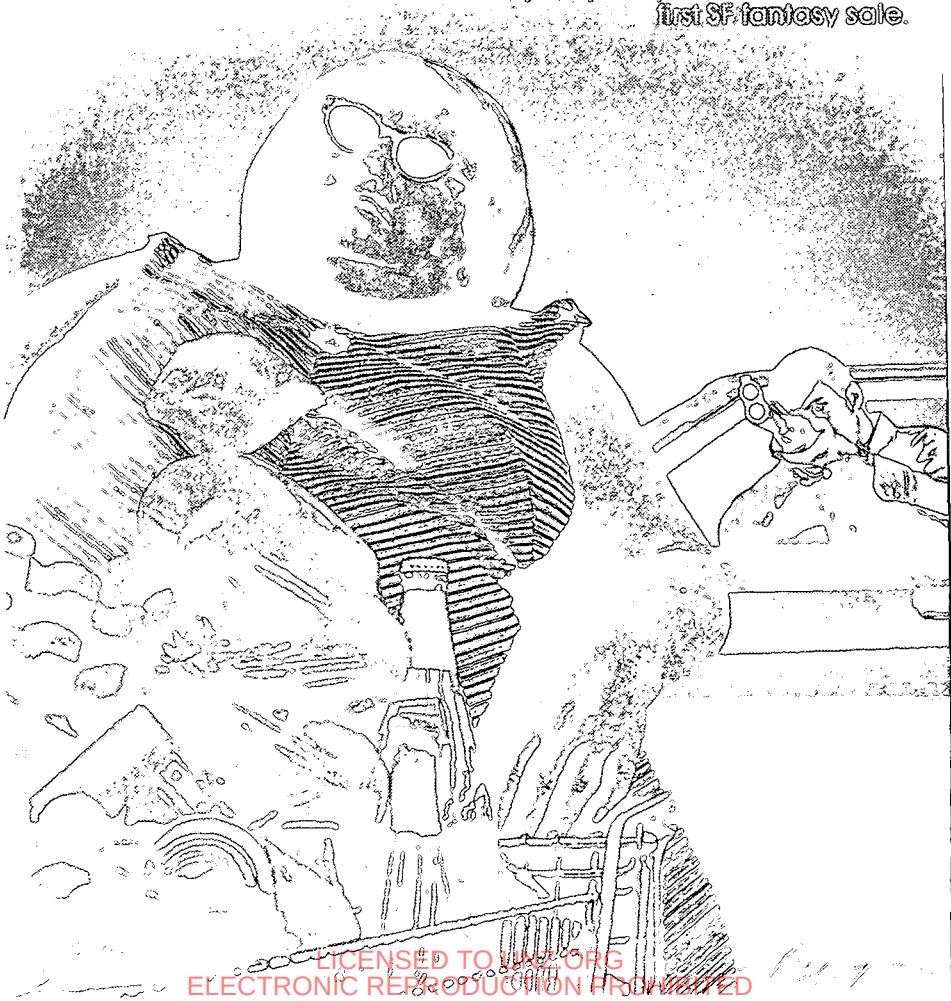
by Bill Crenshaw

LEVIATHAN

art: Carl Wesley

Bill Crenshaw has published a number of stories in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and in 1985 he was the recipient of the Robert L. Fish Memorial award for best first mystery story. "Leviathan," is his first SF/fantasy sale.



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There's this person, see, or this thing disguised as a person, or a thing that's become a person, or a person that's become a thing, like Grendel. You know, Grendel, from high school, that monster in Beowulf who was really a person but a monster too? I don't know *what* this thing is. Maybe more like Grendel's mother, because it's a she, and I'm like Beowulf because I'm hunting her. I've got to kill her. That's my job or my calling.

I've got an elephant rifle because she's big, I mean *big,* four-fifty, maybe five hundred pounds, and she doesn't stand but five-four. When she gets into her Caddy, it just lists over like a schooner in hurricane seas, and you know she's got to have heavy-duty truck shocks on the thing or the whole left side would scrape the pavement, shooting up sparks like a rocket, maybe touch off the gas tank. Sure would save me a lot of trouble.

I track her on the radio and she's everywhere, or maybe she's following *me,* I don't know, because no matter what town I'm in, she's there, somebody's seen her. What happens is I'll just look at a map and let my eyes wander, and pretty soon they'll light on a town, never more than a day's drive from where I am then, and I'll just head for that town, getting in about sundown. I'll pick up a local paper then and go to a fast food place and read things like Hotline and Answer Man where people call in complaints and things and Letters to the Editor and the Radio Program Guide. Sometimes she's in the paper, sometimes not, but she's usually on the radio. I'll give her a week before I move on, but she's always there before me. I don't always see her, but she's *there.*

I started out West, you know, L.A., and I moved across Nevada, up into Utah and Colorado, crossed the panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas, went through Arkansas, down the Big Muddy into Louisiana and Mississippi, then back along the river, all the way into Pennsylvania. Then all the way back down along the Appalachian spine into Alabama, me following her, or she following me, then to Atlanta, two weeks there, then on across SC, NC, VA. I finally nailed her in Petersburg, but what happened I didn't expect.

I pulled into Petersburg as per usual, picked up a paper and sat down to read it, with a hamburger, large fries, apple pie, and a large soda to wash it all down. There she was in the Hotline *and* in the Letters to the Editor. *Bingo,* I thought and then I thought *She must have been working this town for days,* and when I looked close I thought the town did look shabbier than it should, running down fast, not like Lawton, OK, where it's hard to *tell* if she's been in or not because it's so bad off already. I hadn't seen her in Dunn, NC, on Wednesday or Thursday, and Thursday night I looked at the map and the map said Petersburg, and that wasn't all that far, so I left Friday noon. I never rush, you can't rush this thing, you just go with the flow, you *feel* it, you drift and she's there. It's like fate or something, God maybe, but I just go with it, I'm guided.

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So once I saw her in the paper, I sat back and took extra time on the hamburger, no rush especially now, because I had this feeling that this time I had her. I didn't even check the radio schedule. I didn't need to listen. Oh, she'd be on the call-ins, I knew that—she'd be all over the call-ins. But I didn't need to hear it, I *knew* she was there. I wouldn't lose her this time.

It could've been real frustrating, losing her all those times before, if I hadn't realized it was *supposed* to be that way. It *was* real frustrating at first, now that I think back on it, before I got tuned into the flow. I remember this one time in Colorado Springs. I was real down, but then I saw that big blue Caddy in the parking lot at this grocery store. I drove around like I was looking for a parking place, like a shopper, to make sure, but I already knew. There it was, its rear-end hiked up in the air like it was in heat, riding high on those heavy-duty shocks, just waiting for all that loot. I was shaking with excitement. Maybe that was my mistake.

I pulled up about a hundred yards away, where there weren't many cars and where I had a clear line to the trunk, and where I had a brick wall behind that in the distance to stop the slug if I missed. You can see that my job requires some thinking. It wasn't easy to find the perfect spot, what with all that glass on the storefronts, but I found it. I backed the car in so that I was facing her Caddy, so I could shoot and pull straight out to chase her or to get away in case I made a mistake and hit somebody I shouldn't. I've never done that, but I've got to be ready, and if it happens, I'm sorry, but that's that—that's just that.

I reached into the back seat for the gun and shells, put on the scope, and loaded it. I don't keep the gun under a blanket on the back floor anymore because maybe it was dirt that jammed it. It's in a leather case now, all black and soft. I didn't know it *then,* but I had time to check the gun and clean it and all, but I didn't, I was too excited. So I loaded it, opened the door just a little so I could kick it wide when I needed to, laid the gun across my lap, and waited.

Time got rubbery and stretched out. It was late September and be damned if it didn't start snowing, with me used to L.A. weather and all, but my palms were sweating just the same and I was shivery too. I had to kill the heat when I smelled the exhaust and that just made things worse, got me more nervous and cold both, and still with sweaty palms. And time just stretched on out. I wondered what she was doing in there, I *knew* what she was doing in there. I'd seen her a dozen times, waddling that four hundred and fifty pounds down the aisles, damn near filling them up shelf-to-shelf, a human-looking whale with trees for legs and huge flappy arms that you knew hid muscles like spring steel. She'd just lurch and look and thud along, smiling a big smile, huge smile on that

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huge pumpkin head, shock waves from each of those thunder steps rippling up her mile-wide buttocks, over that back like a truck, just rippling in all that fat, rippling for a few seconds even after she'd stopped moving. But she would just keep on smiling and *looking,* not looking at the shelves but at the people, and nod and say "Mornin'," and waddle on, backing them up the aisles, checking everybody out, checking out everything in their carts. Sooner or later she'd steer a course back to the front of the store and stand behind the bag boys, lined up right in the middle of all the check-out lanes, and she'd kind of lean on the plate glass and that glass would bow out and make the reflection all warped and crazy like a fun house mirror, but somehow it never broke.

She never said anything, but soon there'd be a bag boy by her, or maybe even the store manager, with two of those big carry-out carts or more. Then she'd just start pointing at the check-out lanes as the food came through and got rung up to the poor saps in line, and she'd say quiet-like "I'll take that please, and that, oh, *my* doesn't *that* look good, I'll have it too," and those smoked-sausage fingers would be pointing here and there, this lane and that, and the bag boys would pick up what she named and put it into those carry-out carts, and the piles in the carts would start to grow with pork chops, stripey slabs of bacon, bright pink steaks, roasts, sugar-cured hams, big brown tubes of baloney, stacks of grey deli meat, beer and soda and barrels of potato chips, beans and greens, cakes and pies and jugs of cheap wine, and all the while the people in line just kind of went thin and shaky right before your eyes, and their shoes got scuffier, and their shirts even more threadbare, and the life would just drain out of their eyes like water from an unplugged tub. *That's* what she was doing in there. I could just *see* her now, and it made it hard to only sit and wait. The snow was a little thicker when she finally came out, not enough to hurt my aim, but a nuisance. There she came, big as death, lifting those humongous feet and plantin' 'em down, leaning a little too far forward off the curb and tilting off, then having some trouble slowing back up, fat rolling around her as she put on the brakes. I swear I could hear her thighs sliding around on each other from where I was. Then I see what she's got and I can't believe it—three of those carry-out carts piled higher than the bag boys' heads, and slung down from the top of a huge steel rectangle on wheels there's an entire side of beef, and I mean grain-fed prime, I can see the marbling from here. *There must be people dead on the floor in that store,* I think. She reaches that double-wide Caddy and opens the trunk and they start filling it up. That old Caddy just groans, sinking with every bag, looking like surprised twins with those fins, two little bitty red eyes each and a big round "O" for a mouth. And she's nodding and smiling and saying "Thank you, boys," every time they drop a bag in, and I can hear her

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plainly but I can't understand how, she's so far away. Finally everything's in but that half a cow, and I know it's time.

I ease the door open with my left foot, put that foot on the pavement, and edge out so it's got most of my weight. I leave my right knee on the seat and start sneaking the rifle out between the door and the frame, using my elbows and the car to wedge myself in for a steady shot. I think about all these details. They're having trouble with the beef now, good, this is it. I rest my cheek against that smooth woodgrain stock and sight down the scope. She fills it completely up, all I see is her bulk and out-of-focus snow skittering down between and I draw a bead on where her heart should be if she's got a heart and the snow is patting down on my left cheek and I'm not shaking and the crosshairs are right on and I start squeezing the trigger, squeezing, squeezing, and *WHUMP*. I don't really hear the shot until the sound bounces back off the buildings, but before I hear it I know what's happened. Just as I squeezed it off, that side of beef swung right between us, I saw it flick into the scope just as the rifle kicked me. That side of beef must have been frozen, because big chunks were broken off from where it took the slug, and that side of beef was dancing and twisting in my scope when I sighted down again and squeezed and nothing, man, *nothing*, the damn thing was jammed, but I tried anyway and nothing again, and the last thing I saw in the scope was her face looking right down the scope at me, I swear, and she was *smiling*, smiling so big I could see two teeth missing upper right, canine and one behind it, a real nice scary smile. I threw the gun in the back and ruined some tires getting out of the lot. Funny thing, but I don't think anybody heard the shot except us. Nobody else acted at all funny.

Later I began to catch on. Later I knew that the time wasn't right yet, but that I had to keep trying like it was so that *when* it was I would be ready. Sometimes I think I'm the only one on this job, but I always know I'm the only one that can *do* it, and when the time and place and stars are right the dance will be over and that's all she wrote. In Petersburg that night I knew that this was it.

I checked into a motel for a good night's rest, a small motel, private, one off the by-pass, not one of those chains. I always look for family operations, the ones with the neon vacancy sign glowing warm and friendly off the beaten track. Sure I saw *Psycho*, but I'm not a girl so it doesn't matter much.

That night I break the rifle down, oil it, clean it, swab it, polish it, put it back together and do it all again. Finally I shower and lay back in bed. No wake-up call. I'll know when to get up.

I get up about ten, later than usual, but I'm in no hurry. I check out and just start driving around Petersburg, driving slow and feeling the place out, turning right here, left there, just driving. I pass shopping

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center after shopping center, Winn Dixies and A & P's, BiLo's and Food Lions, Ingles and Piggly Wigglys, all of them just drift on by until I finally feel it in front of a new fancy suburban supermarket just thrown up, dirt still scarred around the lot and balloons and pennants and all. *This is it,* I think. *About sunset.* Then I go eat, no fast-food breakfast, steak and eggs, I celebrate.

I go back to the store about an hour before sunset and pick out a good observation post. I might have to move to shoot, but I'll have plenty of time. On my way back in I notice that things look grimier than they did that morning, seedier, more run down. Her power was afoot and her feet were big. So while I sit I focus my eyes on a couple of cars and the big new supermarket letters, and, sure enough, they start to run down too, not so fast that you could see it happen. It's like watching the minute hand on a clock, you can't see it move but you can see it's *moved.* The cars' paint started fading, tires started getting bald, rust spots grew, antennas just flat disappeared. The store letters got fadey too, and chipped, one started leaning funny, and once I see some actual paint flake off. It seemed to be speeding up. "She's coming," I say to myself, and smile.

And then there she is, that high-riding Caddy spewing blue smoke out in the reddish light of sundown, and be damned if she doesn't swing into a space not eighty yards away, right where I can get a good clean shot, and am I ever ready. I realize that I don't have to let her into the store at all, that those people in there don't have to drain out, that I can stop it all now.

I'm all sighted in when her door opens and she starts heaving and jellying her way out. God what an operation, why she doesn't just stick in there I'll never know. Finally she's up, spreading out in a black vinyl raincoat the size of a tent, and it's *still* too small, like she was wearing a skinny man's vest, and Lord she's at six hundred now easy, just bigger than I ever thought she could be, just soaking up life like she soaks up that thin red light. She must have one of those black holes for a stomach that can keep eating and eating and growing and needing to eat more till it eats everything, even its own self. *You're going to eat* **lead** *now,* I think and put her in my scope, but I want a good clean shot and she's waddling back and forth as she moves by her car, so I wait. She reaches the trunk and crosses in front of it and stops. *Hallelujah* I think, because that's perfect, and I move the crosshairs right down between those monster watermelon boobs that are still quivering even though she's stopped, and I squeeze the round off. I don't even feel the kick it fires so smooth, and time stretches out and I swear I can see that slug, its butt red with the sun over my shoulder, spinning a straight line for her heart, trailing two shock wave cones, spinning right in there, dead on, *hits,* and I see

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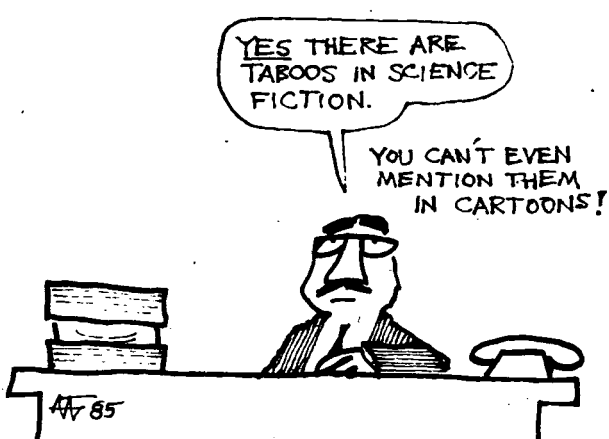
that mountain of flesh ripple and shake at impact, and there's a big shower of glass sparking red and orange as the slug blows out the back window and windshield after going through her, glass tumbling and sparkling and tinkling like a magic fountain. And she stands there, dead on her feet, too heavy even to fall, and I fire more slugs, WHUMP WHUMP, and watch them spin orange and zip in and pull air through and blow out more glass. And *still* she doesn't fall, so I raise my rifle for a head shot, like Beowulf who cut off Grendel's head after Grendel was dead to stop the magic, because I know a head shot will topple her over. But what I see in the scope is her face and that nice gappy smile, and she's looking right down that scope into my eye. Then she rolls her head back and laughs this deep rich laugh, all chocolaty and warm and sympathetic, but deep and hollow, like it's from the bottom of a bottomless pit. Then she shakes her head, still smiling, and she chuckles this deep throaty chuckle like a laugh that can't fight past the fat, and she chuckles like that all the way while she waddles into the store.

I didn't expect that.

I'm not sure what to do now, exactly. I'm still hot on her trail, of course, we're in the Big Apple now. We spent a lot of time in D.C. and Philly, but I didn't have any major luck. I got a copy of Beowulf and reread the parts where he kills the monsters. Maybe I should try for her throat, because that's how Beowulf got Grendel's mother, but he used a magic sword, which I don't have. Maybe I should rip her arm off, but I'm not as strong as Beowulf and she looks to be a damn sight stronger than Grendel. I just don't know. But I'm going with the flow because it's *right*, and we'll be there one day, but I only hope it's soon, because we're leaving a trail of shabby, a mile wide, clear across this continent. ●



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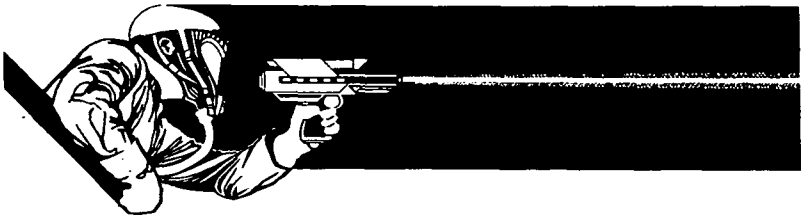

RENDRAG NITRAM (from page 21)

SOLUTION TO TIME-REVERSED WORLDS

"Consider what happens," said Ada, "if after you get the first reply on your Day 2, you erase the computer program you are supposed to send on your Day 100. You will have received a reply to a message that was never sent! A message is sent. The same message is *not* sent. *A* equals *not-A*. It's as sharp a logical contradiction as you can find in a theory."

One might reply that in MacBeath's scheme one simply doesn't permit erasing the message. But clearly that won't remove the flaw. If a theory allows a contradiction, it has to be abandoned. It's as if a logician invented a new formal system of logic, then someone discovered a chain of deductions that led to a statement being both true and false. It won't save the system to say: "But we won't allow such a chain." If the system permits proving a statement to be both true and false, it is logically inconsistent. It has to be discarded or the flaw repaired.

Henny Youngman likes to tell a joke about a man who tells his doctor: "My head hurts when I move it like this." The doctor replies: "Don't move it like that." For years Einstein tried to think of experiments that would prove to Niels Bohr that quantum mechanics is logically inconsistent. One famous argument was so subtle that it kept Bohr up all night trying to find the flaw in Einstein's reasoning. Ironically, it turned out that Einstein had forgotten to take into account the influence of relativity theory on his thought experiment!

Einstein failed to uncover a single logical inconsistency in quantum mechanics, though for the rest of his life he was convinced that the theory was incomplete. What he called "a little voice" told him that the theory would eventually be replaced by a deeper theory that would restore classical causality and rid quantum mechanics of its tendency toward solipsism. If the moon doesn't exist unless someone is looking at it, he liked to ask, will it exist if only a mouse looks at it?

For the answer to last month's problem about the numbers on a clock, see page 178.

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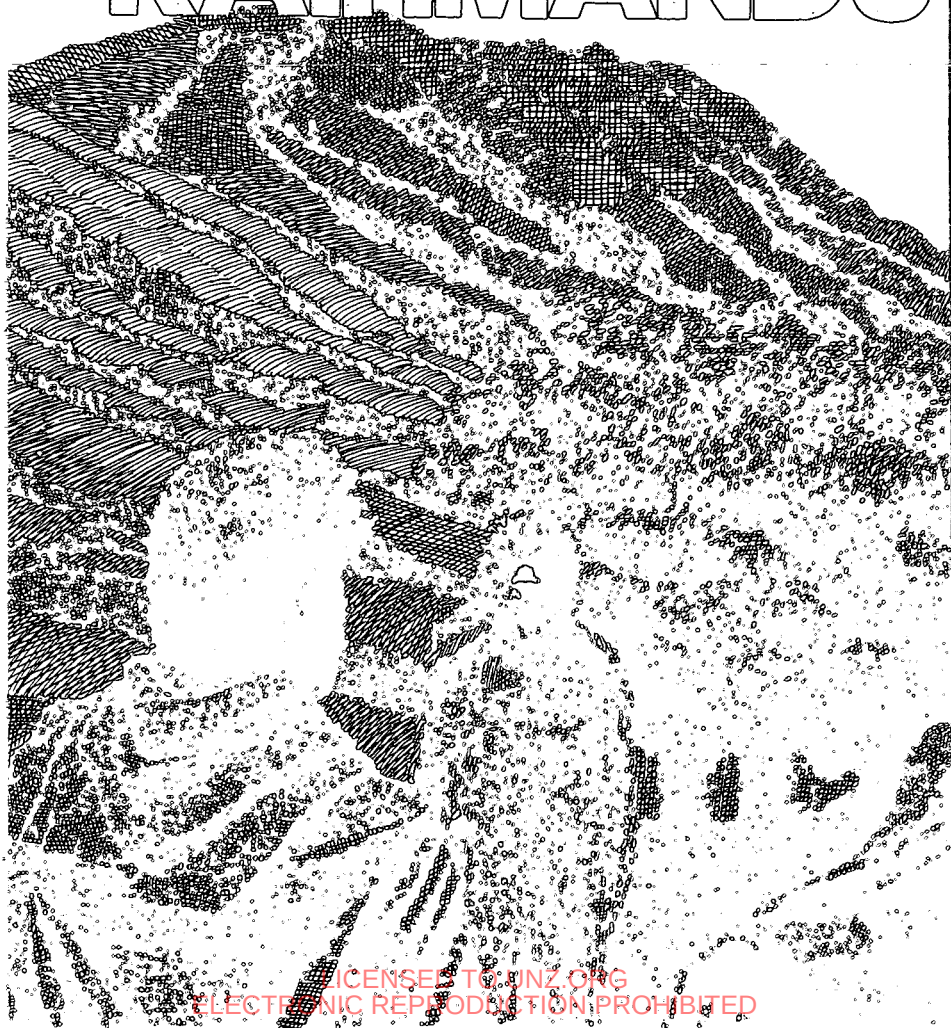
ESCAPE FROM KATHMANDU



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by Kim Stanley Robinson

Mr. Robinson's "Green Mars" (September 1985) was nominated for the Nebula award and is currently a finalist for the 1985 Hugo award. In the following story, this master of deeply moving prose, has taken some time out for an uproarious tale of Yetis, Trekking, Jimmy Carter, and Kathmandu.

art: Janet Aulisio

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I

Usually I'm not much interested in other people's mail. I mean, when you get right down to it, even my own mail doesn't do that much for me. Most of it's junk mail or bills, and even the real stuff is, like, official news from my sister-in-law, photo-copied for the whole clan, or at best an occasional letter from a climbing buddy that reads like a submission to the *Alpine Journal For the Illiterate*. Taking the trouble to read some stranger's version of this kind of stuff? You must be kidding.

But there was something about the dead mail at the Hotel Star in Kathmandu that drew me. Several times each day I would escape the dust and noise of Alice's Second City, cross the sunny paved courtyard of the Star, enter the lobby and get my key from one of the zoned-out Hindu clerks—nice guys all—and turn up the uneven stairs to go to my room. And there at the bottom of the stairwell was a big wooden letter rack nailed to the wall, absolutely *stuffed* with mail. There must have been two hundred letters and postcards stuck up there—thick packets, blue airmail pages, dog-eared postcards from Thailand or Peru, ordinary envelopes covered with complex addresses and purple postal marks—all of them bent over the wooden retainer bars of the rack, all of them gray with dust. Above the rack a cloth print of Ganesh stared down with his sad elephant gaze, as if he represented all the correspondents who had mailed these letters, whose messages were never going to reach their destinations. It was dead mail at its deadest.

And after a while it got to me. I became curious. Ten times a day I passed this sad sight, which never changed—no letters taken away, no new ones added. Such a lot of wasted effort! Once upon a time these names had taken off for Nepal, and back home some relative or friend or lover had taken the time to sit down and write a letter, which to me is like dropping a brick on your foot as far as entertainment is concerned. Heroic, really. "Dear George Fredericks!" they cried. "Where are you, how are you? Your sister-in-law had her baby, and I'm going back to school. When will you be home?" Signed, Faithful Friend, Thinking of You. But George had left for the Himal, or had checked into another hotel and never been to the Star, or was already off to Thailand, Peru, you name it; and the heartfelt effort to reach him was wasted.

One day I came into the hotel a little wasted myself, and noticed this letter to George Fredericks. Just glancing through them all, you know, out of curiosity. My name is George, also—George Fergusson. And this letter to George was the thickest letter-sized envelope there, all dusty and bent permanently across the middle. "George Fredericks—Hotel Star—Thamel Neighborhood—Kathmandu—NEPAL." It had a trio of

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Nepali stamps on it—the King, Cho Oyo, the King again—and the postmark date was illegible, as always.

Slowly, reluctantly, I shoved the letter back into the rack. I tried to satisfy my curiosity by reading a postcard from KoSamui: "Hello! Do you remember me? I had to leave in December when I ran out of money. I'll be back next year. Hello to Franz and Badim Badur—Michel."

No, no. I put the card back and hoisted myself upstairs. Postcards are all alike. *Do you remember me?* Exactly. But that letter to George, now. About half-an-inch thick! Maybe six or eight ounces—some sort of epic, for sure. And apparently written in Nepal, which naturally made it more interesting to me. I'd spent most of the previous year in Nepal, you see, climbing and guiding treks and hanging out; and the rest of the world was beginning to seem pretty unreal. These days I felt the same way about *The International Herald Tribune* that I used to feel about *The National Enquirer*. "Jeez," I'd think as I scanned a Tribby in front of a Thamel bookstore, and read of strange wars, unlikely summits, bizarre hijackings. "How do they think these things up?"

But an epic from Nepal, now. That was reality. And addressed to a "George F." Maybe they had misspelled the last name, eh? And anyway, it was clear by the way the letter was doubled over, and the envelope falling apart, that it had been stuck there for years. A dead loss to the world, if someone didn't save it and read it. All that agony of emotions, of brain cells, of finger muscles, all *wasted*. It was a damn shame.

So I took it.

II

My room, one of the nicest in all Thamel, was on the fourth floor of the Star. The view was eastward, toward the tall bat-filled trees of the King's Palace, overlooking the jumble of Thamel shops. A lot of big evergreens dotted the confusion of buildings; in fact, from my height it looked like a city of trees. In the distance I could see the green hills that contained the Kathmandu Valley, and before the clouds formed in the mornings I could even see some white spikes of the Himal to the north.

The room itself was simple: a bed and a chair, under the light of a single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. But what else do you really need? It's true that the bed was lumpy; but with my foam pad from my climbing gear laid over it to level it out, it was fine. And I had my own bathroom. It's true the seatless toilet leaked pretty badly, but since the shower poured directly onto the floor, and leaked also, it didn't matter. It was also true that the shower came in two parts, a waist-high faucet and a showerhead near the ceiling, and the showerhead didn't work, so

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that to take a shower I had to sit on the floor under the faucet. But that was okay—it was all okay—because that shower was *hot*. The water heater was right there in the room hanging over the toilet, and the water that came from it was so hot that when I took a shower I actually had to turn on the cold water too. That in itself made it one of the finest bathrooms in Thamel.

Anyway, this room and bath had been my castle for about a month, while I waited for the monsoon to end and my next trekkers' group from Mountain Adventure, Inc. to arrive. When I entered it with the lifted letter in hand I had to kick my way through clothes, climbing gear, sleeping bag, food, books, Tribbys—sweep a pile of stuff off the chair—and clear a space for the chair by the windowsill. Then I sat down, and tried to open the bent old envelope without actually ripping it.

No way. It wasn't a Nepali envelope, and there was some real glue on the flap. I did what I could, but the CIA wouldn't have been proud of me.

Out it came. Eight sheets of lined paper, folded twice like most letters, and then bent double by the rack. Writing on both sides. The handwriting was miniaturized and neurotically regular, as easy to read as a paperback. The first page was dated June 2, 1985. So much for my guess concerning its age, but I would have sworn the envelope looked four or five years old. That's Kathmandu dust for you. A sentence near the beginning was underlined heavily: *"You must not tell ANYBODY about this!!!"* Whoah, heavy! I glanced out the window, even. A letter with some secrets in it! How great! I tilted the chair back, flattened the pages, and began to read.

"June 2nd, 1985

Dear Freds—

I know, it's a miracle to get even a postcard from me, much less a letter like this one's going to be. But an amazing thing has happened to me and you're the only friend I can trust to keep it to himself. *You must not tell ANYBODY about this!!!* Okay? I know you won't—ever since we were roommates in the dorm you've been the one I can talk to about anything, in confidence. And I'm glad I've got a friend like you, because I've found I really have to tell this to somebody, or go crazy.

As you may or may not remember, I got a Master's degree in Zoology at U.C. Davis, and put in more years than I care to recall on a Ph.D. there, before I got disgusted and quit. I wasn't going to have anything more to do with any of that, but last fall I got a letter from a friend I had shared an office with, a Sarah Hornsby. She was going to be part of a zoological/botanical expedition to the Himalayas, a camp modeled on the Cronin expedition, where a broad range of specialists set up near treeline, in as pure a wilderness as they can conveniently get to. They wanted me

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along because of my "extensive experience in Nepal," meaning they wanted me to be sirdhar, and my degree didn't have a thing to do with it. That was fine by me. I took the job and went hacking away at the bureaucratic underbrush in Kathmandu. Central Immigration, Ministry of Tourism, Forests and Parks, RNAC, the whole horrible routine, which clearly was designed by someone who had read too much Kafka. But eventually it got done and I took off in the early spring with four animal behaviorists, three botanists, and a ton of supplies, and flew north. We were joined at the airstrip by twenty-two local porters and a real sirdhar, and we started trekking.

I'm not going to tell you exactly where we went. Not because of you; it's just too dangerous to commit it to print. But we were up near the top of one of the watersheds, near the crest of the Himalayas and the border with Tibet. You know how those valleys end: tributaries keep getting higher and higher, and finally there's a last set of box canyon-type valleys fingering up into the highest peaks. We set our base camp where three of these dead-end valleys met, and members of the group could head upstream or down depending on their project. There was a trail to the camp, and a bridge over the river near it, but the three upper valleys were wilderness, and it was tough to get through the forest up into them. It was what these folks wanted, however—untouched wilderness.

When the camp was set the porters left, and there the eight of us were. My old friend Sarah Hornsby was the ornithologist—she's quite good at it, and I spent some time working with her. But she had a boyfriend along, the mammologist (no, not that, Freds), Phil Adrakian. I didn't like him much, from the start. He was the expedition leader, and absolutely MR. ANIMAL BEHAVIOR—but he sure had a tough time finding any mammals up there. Then Valerie Budge was the entomologist—no problem finding subjects for her, eh? (Yes, she did bug me. Another expert.) And Armaat Ray was the herpetologist, though he ended up helping Phil a lot with the blinds. The botanists were named Kitty, Dominique, and John; they spent a lot of time to themselves, in a large tent full of plant samplings.

So—camp life with a zoological expedition. I don't suppose you've ever experienced it. Compared to a climbing expedition it isn't that exciting, I'll tell you. On this one I spent the first week or two crossing the bridge and establishing the best routes through the forest into the three high valleys; after that I helped Sarah with her project, mostly. But the whole time I entertained myself by watching this crew—being an animal behaviorist for the animal behaviorists, so to speak.

What interests me, having once given it a try and decided it wasn't worth it, is why others carry on. Following animals around, then explaining every little thing you see, and then arguing intensely with

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everyone else about the explanations—for a *career?* Why on earth would anyone do it?

I talked about it with Sarah, one day when we were up the middle valley looking for beehives. I told her I had formed a classification system. She laughed. "Taxonomy! You can't escape your training." And she asked me to tell her about it.

First, I said, there were the people who had a genuine and powerful fascination with animals. She was that way herself, I said; when she saw a bird flying, there was a look on her face . . . it was like she was seeing a miracle.

She wasn't so sure she approved of that; you have to be scientifically detached, you know. But she admitted the type certainly existed.

Then, I said, there were the stalkers. These people liked to crawl around in the bush tailing other creatures, like kids playing a game. I went on to explain why I thought this was such a powerful urge; it seemed to me that the life it led to was very similar to the lives led by our primitive ancestors, for a million long years. Living in camps, stalking animals in the woods: to get back to that style of life is a powerfully satisfying feeling.

Sarah agreed, and pointed out that it was also true that nowadays when you got sick of camp life you could go out and sit in a hot bath drinking brandy and listening to Beethoven, as she put it.

"That's right!" I said. "And even in camp there's quite a night life, you've all got your Dostoevski and your arguments over Edmund O. Wilson . . . it's the best of both worlds. Yeah, I think most of you are stalkers on some level."

"But you always say 'you people,' " Sarah pointed out to me. "Why are you outside it, Nathan? Why did you quit?"

And here it got serious; for a few years we had been on the same path, and now we weren't, because I had left it. I thought carefully about how to explain myself. "Maybe it's because of type three, the theorists. Because we must remember that animal behavior is a Very Respectable Academic Field! It has to have its intellectual justification, you can't just go into the academic senate and say, 'Distinguished colleagues, we do it because we like the way birds fly, and it's fun to crawl in the bushes!' "

Sarah laughed at that. "It's true."

And I mentioned ecology and the balance of nature, population biology and the preservation of species, evolutionary theory and how life became what it is, sociobiology and the underlying animal causes for social behavior. . . . But she objected, pointing out those were real concerns.

"Sociobiology?" I asked. She winced. I admitted, then, that there were indeed some excellent angles for justifying the study of animals, but I claimed that for some people these became the most important part of

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the field. As I said, "For most of the people in our department, the theories became more important than the animals. What they observed in the field was just more data for their theory! What interested them was on the page or at the conference, and a lot of them only did field work because you have to to prove you can."

"Oh, Nathan," she said. "You sound cynical, but cynics are just idealists who have been disappointed. I remember that about you—you're such an idealist!"

I know, Freds—you will be agreeing with her: Nathan Howe, idealist. And maybe I am. That's what I told her: "Maybe I am. But jeez, the atmosphere in the department made me sick. Theorists backstabbing each other over their pet ideas, and sounding just as scientific as they could, when it isn't really scientific at all! You can't test these theories by designing an experiment and looking for reproducibility, and you can't isolate your factors or vary them, or use controls—it's just observation and untestable hypothesis, over and over! And yet they acted like such solid scientists, math models and all, like chemists or something. It's just scientism."

Sarah shook her head at me. "You're too idealistic, Nathan. You want things perfect. But it isn't so simple. If you want to study animals, you have to make compromises. As for your classification system, you should write it up for *Sociobiological Review*! But it's just a theory, remember. If you forget that, you fall into the trap yourself."

She had a point, and besides we caught sight of some bees and had to hurry to follow them upstream. So the conversation ended. But during the following evenings in the tent, when Valerie explained to us how human society behaved much like ants—or when Sarah's boyfriend Adrakian, frustrated by his lack of sightings, went off on long analytical jags like he was the hottest theorist since Robert Trivers—she would give me a look and a smile, and I knew I had made my point. Actually, though he talked a big line, I don't think Adrakian was all that good; his publications wouldn't exactly give a porter backstrain, if you know what I mean. I couldn't figure out what Sarah saw in him.

One day soon after that Sarah and I returned to the middle high valley to hunt again for beehives. It was a cloudless morning, a classic Himalayan forest climb: cross the bridge, hike among the boulders in the streambed, ascending from pool to pool; up through damp trees and underbrush, over lumpy lawns of moss. Then atop the wall of the lower valley, and onto the floor of the upper valley, much clearer and sunnier up there in a big rhododendron forest. The rhododendron blooms still flared on every branch, and with the flowers' pink intensity, and the long cones of sunlight shafting down through the leaves to illuminate rough black bark, orange fungi, bright green ferns—it was like hiking

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through a dream. And three thousand feet above us soared a snowy horseshoe ring of peaks. The Himalayas—you know.

So we were in good spirits as we hiked up this high valley, following the streambed. And we were in luck, too. Above one small turn and lift the stream widened into a long narrow pool; on the south face above it was a cliff of striated yellowish granite, streaked with big horizontal cracks. And spilling down from these cracks were beehives. Parts of the cliff seemed to pulsate blackly, clouds of bees drifted in front of it, and above the quiet sound of the stream I could hear the mellow buzz of the bees going about their work. Excited, Sarah and I sat on a rock in the sun, got our binoculars, and started watching for bird life. Goraks upvalley on the snow, a lammergeier sailing over the peaks, finches beeping around as always—and then I saw it—a flick of yellow, just bigger than the biggest hummingbird. A warbler, bobbing on a twig that hung before the hive cliff. Down it flew, to a fallen piece of hive wax; peck peck peck; wax into bird. A honey warbler. I nudged Sarah and pointed it out, but she had already seen it. We were still for a long time, watching.

Edwin Cronin, leader of a previous expedition of this kind to the Himalayas, did one of the first extensive studies of the honey warbler, and I knew that Sarah wanted to check his observations and continue the work. Honey warblers are unusual birds, in that they manage to live off the excess wax of the honey-combs, with the help of some bacteria in their gastro-intestinal systems. It's a digestive feat hardly any other creature on earth has managed, and it's obviously a good move for the bird, as it means they have a very large food source that nothing else is interested in. This makes them very worthy of study, though they hadn't gotten a whole lot of it up to that point—something Sarah hoped to change.

When the warbler, quick and yellow, flew out of sight, Sarah stirred at last—took a deep breath, leaned over and hugged me. Kissed me on the cheek. "Thanks for getting me here, Nathan."

I was uncomfortable. The boyfriend, you know—and Sarah was so much finer a person than he was. . . . And besides, I was remembering, back when we shared that office, she had come in one night all upset because the boyfriend of the time had declared for someone else, and what with one thing and another—well, I don't want to talk about it. But we had been *good friends*. And I still felt a lot of that. So to me it wasn't just a peck on the cheek, if you know what I mean. Anyway, I'm sure I got all awkward and formal in my usual way.

In any case, we were pretty pleased at our discovery, and we returned to the honey cliff every day after that for a week. It was a really nice time. Then Sarah wanted to continue some studies she had started of the goraks, and so I hiked on up to Honey Cliff on my own a few times.

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It was on one of these days by myself that it happened. The warbler didn't show up, and I continued upstream to see if I could find the source. Clouds were rolling up from the valley below and it looked like it would rain later, but it was still sunny up where I was. I reached the source of the stream—a spring-fed pool at the bottom of a talus slope—and stood watching it pour down into the world. One of those quiet Himalayan moments, where the world seems like an immense chapel.

Then a movement across the pool caught my eye, there in the shadow of two gnarled oak trees. I froze, but I was right out in the open for anyone to see. There under one of the oaks, in shadow darker for the sunlight, a pair of eyes watched me. They were about my height off the ground. I thought it might be a bear, and was mentally reviewing the trees behind me for climbability, when it moved again—it blinked. And then I saw that the eyes had whites visible around the iris. A villager, out hunting? I didn't think so. My heart began to hammer away inside me, and I couldn't help swallowing. Surely that was some sort of *face* there in the shadows? A bearded face?

Of course I had an idea what I might be trading glances with. The yeti, the mountain man, the elusive creature of the snows. The *Abominable Snowman,* for God's sake! My heart's never pounded faster. What to do? The whites of its eyes . . . chimpanzees have white eyelids that they use to make threats, and if you look at them directly they see the white of your eyes, and believe you are threatening them; on the off-chance that this creature had a similar code, I tilted my head and looked at him indirectly. I swear it appeared to nod back at me.

Then another blink, only the eyes didn't return. The bearded face and the shape below it were gone. I started breathing again, listened as hard as I could, but never heard anything except for the chuckle of the stream.

After a minute or two I crossed the stream and took a look at the ground under the oak. It was mossy, and there were areas of moss that had been stepped on by something at least as heavy as me; but no clear tracks, of course. And nothing more than that, in any direction.

I hiked back down to camp in a daze; I hardly saw a thing, and jumped at every little sound. You can imagine how I felt—a sighting like that . . . !

And that very night, while I was trying to quietly eat my stew and not reveal that anything had happened, the group's conversation veered onto the topic of the yeti. I almost dropped my fork. It was Adrakian again—he was frustrated at the fact that despite all of the spoor visible in the area, he had only actually seen some squirrels and a distant monkey or two. Of course it would have helped if he'd spent the night in the night blinds more often. Anyway, he wanted to bring up something, to be the center of attention and take the stage as The Expert. "You

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know these high valleys are exactly the zone the yeti live in," he announced matter-of-factly.

That's when the fork almost left me. "It's almost certain they exist, of course," Adrakian went on, with a funny smile.

"Oh, Philip," Sarah said. She said that a lot to him these days, which didn't bother me at all.

"It's true." Then he went into the whole bit, which of course all of us knew: the tracks in the snow that Eric Shipton photographed, George Schaller's support for the idea, the prints Cronin's party found, the many other sightings. . . . "There are thousands of square miles of impenetrable mountain wilderness here, as we now know first hand."

Of course I didn't need any convincing. And the others were perfectly willing to concede the notion. "Wouldn't that be something if we found one!" Valerie said. "Got some good photos—"

"Or found a body," John said. Botanists think in terms of stationary subjects.

Phil nodded slowly. "Or if we captured a live one. . . ."

"We'd be famous," Valerie said.

Theorists. They might even get their names latinized and made part of the new species' name. *Gorilla montani adrakianias-budgeon.*

I couldn't help myself; I had to speak up. "If we found good evidence of a yeti it would be our duty to get rid of it and forget about it," I said, perhaps a bit too loudly.

They all stared at me. "Whatever for?" Valerie said.

"For the sake of the yeti, obviously," I said coldly. "As animal behaviorists you're presumably concerned about the welfare of the animals you study, right? And the ecospheres they live in? But if the existence of the yeti were confirmed, it would be disastrous for both. There would be an invasion of expeditions, tourists, poachers—yetis in zoos, in primate center cages, in laboratories under the knife, stuffed in museums—" I was getting upset. "I mean what's the real value of the yeti for us, anyway?" They only stared at me: value? "Their *value* is the fact that they're unknown, they're beyond science. They're the part of the wilderness we can't touch."

"I can see Nathan's point," Sarah remarked in the ensuing silence, with a look at me that made me lose my train of thought. Her agreement meant an awful lot more than I would have expected. . . .

The others were shaking their heads. "A nice sentiment," Valerie said. "But really, hardly any of them would be affected by study. Think what they'd add to our knowledge of primate evolution!"

"Finding one would be a contribution to science," Phil said, glaring at Sarah. And he really believed that, too, I have to give him that.

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Armaat said slyly, "It wouldn't do any harm to our chances for tenure, either."

"There is that," Phil admitted. "But the real point is, you have to abide by what's *true*. If we found a yeti we'd be obliged to say so, because it was so—no matter how we felt about it. Otherwise you get into suppressing data, altering data, all that kind of thing."

I shook my head. "There are values that are more important than scientific integrity."

And the argument went on from there, mostly repeating points. "You're an idealist," Phil said to me at one point. "You can't *do* zoology without disturbing some subject animals to a certain extent."

"Maybe that's why I got out," I said. And I had to stop myself from going further. How could I say that he was corrupted by the tremendous job pressures in the field to the point where he'd do anything to make a reputation, without the argument getting ugly? Impossible. And Sarah would be upset with me. I only sighed. "What about the subject animal?"

Valerie said indignantly, "They'd trank it, study it, put it back in its environment. Maybe keep one in captivity, where it would live a lot more comfortably than in the wild."

Total corruption. Even the botanists looked uncomfortable with that one.

"Let's just hope we never find one," Sarah said, frowning. "That way the problem will never come up."

"I don't think we have to worry," Armaat said with his sly smile. "The beast is supposed to be nocturnal."—Because Phil had shown no enthusiasm for night blinds, you see.

"Exactly why I'm starting a high-valley night blind," Phil snapped, tired of Armaat's needling. "Nathan, I'll need you to come along and help set it up."

"And find the way," I said. The others continued to argue, Sarah taking my position, or at least something sympathetic to it; I retired, worried about the figure in the shadows I had seen that day. Phil watched me suspiciously as I left.

So, Phil had his way, and we set up a tiny blind in the upper valley to the west of the one I had made the sighting in. We spent several nights up in an oak tree, and saw a lot of Himalayan spotted deer, and some monkeys at dawn. Phil should have been pleased, but he only got sullen. It occurred to me from some of his mutterings that he had hoped all along to find the yeti; he had come craving that big discovery.

And one night it happened. The moon was gibbous, and thin clouds let most of its light through. About two hours before dawn I was in a doze, and Adrakian elbowed me. Wordlessly he pointed at the far side of a small pool in the stream.

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Shadows in shadows, shifting. A streak of moonlight on the water—then, silhouetted above it, an upright figure. For a moment I saw its head clearly, a tall, oddly shaped, furry skull. It looked almost human.

I wanted to shout a warning; instead I shifted my weight on the platform. It creaked very slightly, and instantly the figure was gone.

"Idiot!" Phil whispered. In the moonlight he looked murderous. "I'm going after him!" He jumped out of the tree and pulled what I assumed was a tranquilizer pistol from his down jacket.

"You can't find anything out there at night!" I whispered, but he was gone. I climbed down and took off after him—with what purpose I wasn't sure.

Well, you know the forest at night. Not a chance of seeing animals, or of getting around very easily, either. I have to give it to Adrakian—he was fast, and quiet. I lost him immediately, and after that only heard an occasional snapped branch in the distance. More than an hour passed, and I was only wandering through the trees. The moon had set and the sky was about halfway to dawn light when I returned to the stream.

I rounded a big boulder that stood on the bank and almost ran straight into a yeti coming the other way, as if we were on a busy sidewalk and had veered the same direction to avoid each other. He was a little shorter than me; dark fur covered his body and head, but left his face clear—a patch of pinkish skin that in the dim light looked quite human. His nose was as much human as ape-like—broad, but protruding from his face—like an extension of the occipital crest that ridged his skull fore-to-aft. His mouth was broad and his jaw, under its ruff of fur, very broad—but nothing that took him outside the parameters of human possibility. He had thick eyebrow crests bent high over his eyes, so that he had a look of permanent surprise, like a cat I once owned.

At this moment I'm sure he really was surprised. We both were as still as trees, swaying gently in the wind of our confrontation—but no other movement. I wasn't even breathing. What to do? I noticed he was carrying a small smoothed stick, and there in the fur on his neck were some objects on a cord. His face—tools—ornamentation: a part of me, the part outside the shock of it all, was thinking (I suppose I am still a zoologist at heart), *They aren't just primates, they're hominid.*

As if to confirm this idea, he spoke to me. He hummed briefly; squeaked; sniffed the air hard a few times; lifted his lip (quite a canine was revealed) and whistled, very softly. In his eyes there was a question, so calmly, gently, and intelligently put forth that I could hardly believe I couldn't understand and answer it.

I raised my hand, very slowly, and tried to say "Hello." I know, stupid, but what do you say when you meet a yeti? Anyway, nothing came out but a strangled "Huhn."

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He tilted his head to the side inquisitively, and repeated the sound. "Huhn. Huhn. Huhn."

Suddenly he jacked his head forward and stared past me, upstream. He opened his mouth wide and stood there listening. He stared at me, trying to judge me. (I swear I could tell these things!)

Upstream there was a crash of branches, and he took me by the arm and wham, we were atop the stream bank and in the forest. Hoppety-hop through the trees and we were down on our bellies behind a big fallen log, lying side-by-side in squishy wet moss. My arm hurt.

Phil Adrakian appeared down in the streambed, looking considerably the worse for wear. He'd scraped through some brush and torn the nylon of his down jacket in several places, so that fluffy white down wafted away from him as he walked. And he'd fallen in mud somewhere. The yeti squinted hard as he looked at him, clearly mystified by the escaping down.

"Nathan!" Phil cried. "Naaaa—thannn!" He was still filled with energy, it seemed. "I saw one! Nathan, where are you, dammit!" He continued downstream, yelling, and the yeti and I lay there and watched him pass by.

I don't know if I've ever experienced a more satisfying moment.

When he had disappeared around a bend in the stream, the yeti sat up and sprawled back against the log like a tired backpacker. The sun rose, and he only squeaked, whistled, breathed slowly, watched me. What was he thinking? At this point I didn't have a clue. It was even frightening me; I couldn't imagine what might happen next.

His hands, longer and skinnier than human hands, plucked at my clothes. He plucked at his own necklace, pulled it up over his head. What looked like fat seashells were strung on a cord of braided hemp. They were fossils, of shells very like scallop shells—evidence of the Himalayas' days underwater. What did the yeti make of them? No way of knowing. But clearly they were valued, they were part of a culture.

For a long time he just looked at this necklace of his. Then, very carefully, he placed this necklace over my head, around my neck. My skin burned in an instant flush, everything blurred through tears, my throat hurt—I felt like God had just stepped from behind a tree and blessed me, and for no reason, you know? I didn't deserve it.

Without further ado he hopped up and walked off bowleggedly, without a glance back. I was left alone in the morning light with nothing except for the necklace, which hung solidly on my chest. And a sore arm. So it *had* happened, I hadn't dreamed it. I had been blessed.

When I had collected my wits I hiked downstream and back to camp. By the time I got there the necklace was deep in one of my down jacket's padded pockets, and I had a story all worked out.

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Phil was already there, chattering to the entire group. "There you are!" he shouted. "Where the hell were you? I was beginning to think they had gotten you!"

"I was looking for you," I said, finding it very easy to feign irritation. "Who's this *they?*

"The yeti, you fool! You saw him too, don't deny it! And I followed him and saw him again, up the river there."

I shrugged and looked at him dubiously. "I didn't see anything."

"You weren't in the right place! You should have been with me." He turned to the others. "We'll shift the camp up there for a few days, very quietly. It's an unprecedented opportunity!"

Valerie was nodding, Armaat was nodding, even Sarah looked convinced. The botanists looked happy to have some excitement.

I objected that moving that many people upvalley would be difficult, and disruptive to whatever life was up there. And I suggested that what Phil had seen was a bear. But Phil wasn't having it. "What I saw had a big occipital crest, and walked upright. It was a yeti."

So despite my protests, plans were made to move the camp to the high valley and commence an intensive search for the yeti. I didn't know what to do. More protests from me would only make it look suspiciously like I had seen what Phil had seen. I have never been very clever at thinking up subterfuges to balk the plans of others; that's why I left the university in the first place.

I was at my wit's end when the weather came through for me with an early monsoon rainstorm. It gave me an idea. The watershed for our valley was big and steep, and one day's hard rain, which we got, would quickly elevate the level of water in our river. We had to cross the bridge before we could start up the three high valleys, and we had to cross two more to get back out to the airstrip.

So I had my chance. In the middle of the night I snuck out and went down to the bridge. It was the usual village job: piles of big stones on each bank, supporting the three half-logs of the span. The river was already washing the bottom of the stone piles, and some levering with a long branch collapsed the one on our shore. It was a strange feeling to ruin a bridge, one of the most valuable human works in the Himalayas, but I went at it with a will. Quickly the logs slumped and fell away from each other, and the end of the downstream one floated away. It was easy enough to get the other two under way as well. Then I snuck back into camp and into bed.

And that was that. Next day I shook my head regretfully at the discovery, and mentioned that the flooding would be worse downstream. I wondered out loud if we had enough food to last through the monsoon, which of course we didn't; and another hour's hard rain was enough to

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convince Armaat and Valerie and the botanists that the season was up. Phil's shrill protests lost out, and we broke camp and left the following morning, in a light mist that turned to brilliant wet sunshine by noon. But by then we were well downtrail, and committed.

There you have it, Freds. Are you still reading? I lied to, concealed data from, and eventually scared off the expedition of old colleagues that hired me. But you can see I had to do it. There is a creature up there, intelligent and full of peace. Civilization would destroy it. And that yeti who hid with me—somehow he *knew* I was on their side. Now it's a trust I'd give my life to uphold, really. You can't betray something like that.

On the hike back out, Phil continued to insist he had seen a yeti, and I continued to disparage the idea, until Sarah began to look at me funny. And I regret to report that she and Phil became friendly once again as we neared J—, and the end of our hike out. Maybe she felt sorry for him, maybe she somehow knew that I was acting in bad faith. I wouldn't doubt it; she knew me pretty well. But it was depressing, whatever the reason. And nothing to be done about it. I had to conceal what I knew, and lie, no matter how much it screwed up that friendship, and no matter how much it hurt. So when we arrived at J—, I said goodbye to them all. I was pretty sure that the funding difficulties endemic in zoology would keep them away for a good long time to come, so that was okay. As for Sarah—well—damn it . . . a bit reproachfully I said farewell to her. And I hiked back to Kathmandu rather than fly, to get away from her, and work things off a bit.

The nights on this hike back have been so long that I finally decided to write this, to occupy my mind. I hoped writing it all down would help, too; but the truth is, I've never felt lonelier. It's been a comfort to imagine you going nuts over my story—I can just see you jumping around the room and shouting "YOU'RE KIDDING!" at the top of your lungs, like you used to. I hope to fill you in on any missing details when I see you in person this fall in Kathmandu. Til then—

your friend, Nathan"

III

Well, blow my mind. When I finished reading that letter all I could say was "Wow." I went back to the beginning and started to re-read the whole thing, but quickly skipped ahead to the good parts. A meeting with the famed Abominable Snowman! What an event! Of course all this Nathan guy had managed to get out was "Huhn." But the circumstances were unusual, and I suppose he did his best.

I've always wanted to meet a yeti myself. Countless mornings in the

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Himal I've gotten up in the light before dawn and wandered out to take a leak and see what the day was going to be like, and almost every time, especially in the high forests, I've looked around and wondered if that twitch at the corner of my sleep-crusted eye wasn't something abominable, *moving*.

It never had been, so far as I know. And I found myself a bit envious of this Nathan and his tremendous luck. Why had this yeti, member of the shyest race in Central Asia, been so relaxed with him? It was a mystery to consider as I went about in the next few days, doing my business. And I wished I could do more than that, somehow. I checked the Star's register to look for both Nathan and George Fredericks, and found Nathan's perfect little signature back in mid-June, but no sign of George, or Freds, as Nathan called him. The letter implied they would both be around this fall, but where?

Then I had to ship some Tibetan carpets to the States, and my company wanted me to clear three "videotreks" with the Ministry of Tourism, at the same time that Central Immigration decided I had been in the country long enough; and dealing with these matters, in the city where mailing a letter can take you all day, made me busy indeed. I almost forgot about it.

But when I came into the Star late one sunny blue afternoon and saw that some guy had gone berserk at the mail rack, had taken it down and scattered the poor paper corpses all over the first flight of stairs, I had a feeling I might know what the problem was. I was startled, maybe even a little guilty-feeling, but not at all displeased. I squashed the little pang of guilt and stepped past the two clerks, who were protesting in rapid Nepali. "Can I help you find something?" I said to the distraught person who had wreaked the havoc.

He straightened up and looked me straight in the eye. Straight-shooter, all the way. "I'm looking for a friend of mine who usually stays here." He wasn't panicked yet, but he was close. "The clerks say he hasn't been here in a year, but I sent him a letter this summer, and it's gone."

Contact! Without batting an eye I said, "Maybe he dropped by and picked it up without checking in."

He winced like I'd stuck a knife in him. He looked about like what I had expected from his epic: tall, upright, dark-haired. He had a beard as thick and fine as fur, neatly trimmed away from neck and below the eyes—just about a perfect beard, in fact. That beard and a jacket with leather elbows would have got him tenure at any university in America.

But now he was seriously distraught, though he was trying not to show it. "I don't know how I'm going to find him, then. . . ."

"Are you sure he's in Kathmandu?"

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"He's supposed to be. He's joining a big climb in two weeks. But he always stays here!"

"Sometimes it's full. Maybe he had to go somewhere else."

"Yeah, that's true." Suddenly he came out of his distraction enough to notice he was talking to me, and his clear, grey-green eyes narrowed as he examined me.

"George Fergusson," I said, and stuck out my hand. He tried to crush it, but I resisted just in time.

"My name's Nathan Howe. Funny about yours," he said without a smile. "I'm looking for a George Fredericks."

"Is that right! What a coincidence." I started picking up all the Star's bent mail. "Well, maybe I can help you. I've had to find friends in Kathmandu before—it's not easy, but it can be done."

"Yeah?" It was like I'd thrown him a lifebuoy; what was his problem?

"Sure. If he's going on a climb he's had to go to Central Immigration to buy the permits for it. And on the permits you have to write down your local address. I've spent too many hours at C.I., and have some friends there. If we slip them a couple hundred rupees baksheesh they'll look it up for us."

"Fantastic!" Now he was Hope Personified, actually quivering with it. "Can we go now?" I saw that his heartthrob, the girlfriend of The Unscrupulous One, had had him pegged; he was an idealist, and his ideas shone through him like the mantle of a Coleman lantern gleaming through the glass. Only a blind woman wouldn't have been able to tell how he felt about her; I wondered how this Sarah had felt about him.

I shook my head. "It's past two—closed for the day." We got the rack back on the wall, and the clerks returned to the front desk. "But there's a couple other things we can try, if you want." Nathan nodded, stuffing mail as he watched me. "Whenever I try to check in here and it's full, I just go next door. We could look there."

"Okay," said Nathan, completely fired up. "Let's go."

So we walked out of the Star and turned right to investigate at the Lodge Pheasant—or Lodge Pleasant—the sign is ambiguous on that point.

Sure enough, George Fredericks had been staying there. Checked out that very morning, in fact. "Oh my God no," Nathan cried, as if the guy had just died. Panic time was really getting close.

"Yes," the clerk said brightly, pleased to have found the name in his thick book. "He is go on trek."

"But he's not due to leave here for two weeks!" Nathan protested.

"He's probably off on his own first," I said. "Or with friends."

That was it for Nathan. Panic, despair; he had to go sit down. I thought about it. "If he was flying out, I heard all of RNAC's flights to the

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mountains were canceled today. So maybe he came back in and went to dinner. Does he know Kathmandu well?"

Nathan nodded glumly. "As well as anybody."

"Let's try the Old Vienna Inn, then."

IV

In the blue of early evening Thamel was jumping as usual. Lights snapped on in the storefronts that opened on the street, and people were milling about. Big Land Rovers and little Toyota taxis forged through the crowd abusing their horns; cows in the street chewed their cud and stared at it all with expressions of faint surprise, as if they'd been magically zipped out of a pasture just seconds before.

Nathan and I walked single file against the store fronts, dodging bikes and jumping over the frequent puddles. We passed carpet shops, climbing outfitters, restaurants, used book stores, trekking agents, hotels, and souvenir stands, and as we made our way we turned down a hundred offers from the young men of the street: "Change money?" "No." "Smoke dope?" "No." "Buy a nice carpet?" "No." "Good hash!" "No." "Change money?" "No." Long ago I had simplified walking in the neighborhood, and just said "No" to everyone I passed. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no." Nathan had a different method that seemed to work just as well—or better, since the hustlers never seemed to think I was negative enough; he would nod politely with that straight-shooter look, and say "No, thank you," and leave them open-mouthed in the street.

We passed K.C.'s, threaded our way through "Times Square," a crooked intersection with a perpetual traffic jam, and started down the street that led out of Thamel into the rest of Kathmandu. Two merchants stood in the doorway of their shop, singing along with a cassette of Pink Floyd's *The Wall:* "We don't need no education, we don't need no thought control." I almost got run over by a bike. Where the street widened and the paving began, I pushed a black goat to one side, and we leaped over a giant puddle into a tunnel-like hall that penetrated one of the ramshackle streetside buildings. Up the hall, turn left up scuzzy concrete stairs. "Have you been here before?" I asked Nathan.

"No, I always go to K.C.'s or Red Square." He looked as though he wasn't sorry, either.

At the top of the stairs we opened the door, and stepped into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. White tablecloths, paneled partitions between deep booths, red wallpaper in a fleur-de-lis pattern, plush upholstery, tasteful kitschy lamps hanging over every table; and suffusing the air, the steamy pungent smell of sauerkraut and goulash. Strauss waltzes on the box.

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Except for the faint honking from the street below, it was absolutely the real item.

"My Lord," Nathan said, "How did they get *this* here?"

"It's mostly her doing." The owner and resident culinary genius, a big plump friendly woman, came over and greeted me in stiff Germanic English.

"Hello, Eva. We're looking for a friend—" But then Nathan was already past us, and rushing down toward a small booth in the back.

"I think we find him," Eva said with a smile.

By the time I got to the table Nathan was pumping the arm of a short, long-haired blond guy in his late thirties, slapping his back, babbling with relief—overwhelmed with relief, by the look of it. "Freds, thank God I found you!"

"Good to see you too, bud! Pretty lucky, actually—I was gonna split with some Brits for the hills this morning, but old Reliability Negative Airline bombed out again." Freds had a faint Southern or country accent, and talked as fast as anyone I'd ever heard, sometimes faster.

"I know," Nathan said. He looked up and saw me. "Actually, my new friend here figured it out. George Fergusson, this is George Fredericks."

We shook hands. "Nice name!" George said. "Call me Freds, everyone does." We slid in around his table while Freds explained that the friends he was going to go climbing with were finding them rooms. "So what are you up to, Nathan? I didn't even know you were in Nepal. I thought you were back in the States working, saving wildlife refuges or something."

"I was," Nathan said, and his grim do-or-die expression returned. "But I had to come back. Listen—you didn't get my letter?"

"No, did you write me?" said Freds.

Nathan stared right at me, and I looked as innocent as I could. "I'm going to have to take you into my confidence," he said to me. "I don't know you very well, but you've been a big help today, and the way things are I can't really be. . . ."

"Fastidious?"

"No no no—I can't be over-cautious, you see. I tend to be over-cautious, as Freds will tell you. But I need help,now." And he was dead serious.

"Just giving you a hard time," I reassured him, trying to look trustworthy, loyal, and all that; difficult, given the big grin on Freds' face.

"Well, here goes," Nathan said, speaking to both of us. "I've got to tell you what happened to me on the expedition I helped in the spring. It still isn't easy to talk about, but . . ."

And ducking his head, leaning forward, lowering his voice, he told us the tale I had read about in his lost letter. Freds and I leaned forward as well, so that our heads practically knocked over the table. I did all I could to indicate my shocked surprise at the high points of the story, but

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I didn't have to worry about that too much, because Freds supplied all the amazement necessary. "You're kidding," he'd say. "No. Incredible. I can't believe it. It just *stood there?* You're *kidding!* In-fucking-credible, man! I can't *believe* it! How great! What?—oh, no! You didn't!" And when Nathan told about the yeti giving him the necklace, sure enough, just as Nathan had predicted, Freds jumped up out of the booth and leaned back in and shouted, "YOU'RE KIDDING!!"

"Shh!" Nathan hissed, putting his face down on the tablecloth. "No! Get back down here, Freds! Please!"

So he sat down and Nathan went on, to the same sort of response ("You tore the fucking BRIDGE DOWN!?!" *"SHHHH!!"*); and when he was done we all leaned back in the booth, exhausted. Slowly the other customers stopped staring at us. I cleared my throat: "But then today, you um, you indicated that there was still a problem, or some new problem . . . ?"

Nathan nodded, lips pursed. "Adrakian went back and got money from a rich old guy in the States whose hobby used to be *big game hunting.* J. Reeves Fitzgerald. Now he keeps a kind of a photo zoo on a big estate. He came over here with Adrakian, and Valerie, and Sarah too even, and they went right back up to the camp we had in the spring. I found out about it from Armaat and came here quick as I could. Right after I arrived, they checked into a suite at the Sheraton. A bellboy told me they came in a Land Rover with its windows draped, and he saw someone funny hustled upstairs, and now they're locked into that suite like it's a fort. And I'm afraid—I think—I think they've *got one up there.*

Freds and I looked at each other. "How long ago was this?" I asked.

"Just two days ago! I've been hunting for Freds ever since, I didn't know what else to do!"

Freds said, "What about that Sarah? Is she still with them?"

"Yes," Nathan grated, looking at the table. "I can't believe it, but she is." He shook his head. "If they're hiding a yeti up there—if they've got one—then, well, it's all over for the yeti. It'll just be a disaster for them."

I supposed that was true enough. Freds was nodding automatically, agreeing just because Nathan had said it. "It would be a zoo up there, ha ha."

"So you'll help?" Nathan asked.

"Of course, man! Naturally!" Freds looked surprised Nathan would even ask.

"I'd like to," I said. And that was the truth, too. The guy brought it out in you, somehow.

"Thanks," said Nathan. He looked very relieved. "But what about this climb you were going on, Freds?"

"No prob. I was a late add-on anyway, just for fun. They'll be fine. I

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was beginning to wonder about going with them this time anyway. They got themselves a Trivial Pursuit game for this climb, to keep them from going bonkers in their tents. We tried it out yesterday and you know I'm real good at Trivial Pursuit, except for the history, literature, and entertainment categories, but this here game was the *British* version. So we get a buzz on and start to playing and suddenly I'm part of a Monty Python routine, I mean they just don't play it the same! You know how when we play it and you don't know the answer everyone says Ha, too bad—but here I take my turn and go for sports and leisure which is my natural forté, and they pull the card and ask me, 'Who was it bowled three hundred and sixty-five consecutive sticky wickets at the West Indian cricket match of 1956,' or whatever, and they liked to *died* they were laughing so hard. They jumped up and danced around me and *howled*. 'Yew don't know, dew yew! Yew don't have the slightest fookin' *idear* who bowled those sticky wickets, dew yew!' It was really hard to concentrate on my answer. So. Going with them this time might have been a mistake anyway. Better to stay here and help you."

Nathan and I could only agree.

Then Eva came by with our food, which we had ordered after Nathan's epic. The amazing thing about the Old Vienna Inn is that the food is even better than the decor. It would be good anywhere, and in Kathmandu, where almost everything tastes a little like cardboard, it's simply unbelievable. "Look at this steak!" Freds said. "Where the hell do they get the meat?"

"Didn't you ever wonder how they keep the street cow population under control?" I asked.

Freds liked that. "I can just imagine them sneaking one of them big honkers into the back here. Wham!"

Nathan began to prod dubiously at his snitzel. And then, over a perfect meal, we discussed the problem facing us. As usual in situations like this, I had a plan.

V

I have never known baksheesh to fail in Kathmandu, but that week at the Everest Sheraton International the employees were bottled up tight. They didn't even want to *hear* about anything out of the ordinary, much less be part of it, no matter the gain. Something was up, and I began to suspect that J. Reeves Fitzgerald had a very big bankroll indeed. So Plan A for getting into Adrakian's room was foiled, and I retired to the hotel bar, where Nathan was hidden in a corner booth, suitably

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disguised in sunglasses and an Australian outback hat. He didn't like my news.

The Everest Sheraton International is not exactly like Sheratons elsewhere, but it is about the quality of your average Holiday Inn, which makes it five star in Kathmandu, and just about as incongruous as the Old Vienna. The bar looked like an airport bar, and there was a casino in the room next to us, which clearly, to judge by the gales of laughter coming from it, no one could take seriously. Nathan and I sat and nursed our drinks and waited for Freds, who was casing the outside of the hotel.

Suddenly Nathan clutched my forearm. "Don't look!"

"Okay."

"Oh, my God, they must have hired a whole bunch of private security cops. Jeez, look at those guys. No, don't look!"

Unobtrusively I glanced at the group entering the bar. Identical boots, identical jackets, with little bulges under the arm; clean-cut looks, upright, almost military carriage. . . . They looked a little bit like Nathan, to tell the truth, but without the beard. "Hmm," I said. Definitely not your ordinary tourists. Fitzgerald's bankroll must have been *very* big.

Then Freds came winging into the bar and slid into our booth. "Problems, man."

"Shh!" Nathan said. "See those guys over there?"

"I know," said Freds. "They're Secret Service agents."

"They're *what?*" Nathan and I said in unison.

"Secret Service agents."

"Now *don't* tell me this Fitzgerald is a close friend of Reagan's," I began, but Freds was shaking his head and grinning.

"No. They're here with Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter. Haven't you heard?"

Nathan shook his head, but I had a sudden sinking feeling as I remembered a rumor of a few weeks back. "He wanted to see Everest . . . ?"

"That's right. I met them all up in Namche a week ago, actually. But now they're back, and staying here."

"Oh my god," Nathan said. "Secret Service men, *here.*"

"They're nice guys, actually," Freds said. "We talked to them a lot in Namche. Real straight, of course—real straight—but nice. They told us what was happening in the World Series, and what their jobs were like, and everything. Of course sometimes we asked them questions about the Carters and they just looked around like no one had said anything, which was weird, but mostly they were real normal."

"And *what* are they doing here?" I said, still not quite able to believe it.

"Well, Jimmy wanted to go see Everest. So they all helicoptered into Namche just as if there was no such thing as altitude sickness, and took

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off for Everest! I was talking just now with one of the agents I met up there, and he told me how it came out. Rosalynn got to fifteen thousand feet and turned back, but Jimmy kept on trudging. Here he's got all these young tough Secret Service guys to protect him, you know, but they started to get sick, and every day they were helicoptering out a number of them because of altitude sickness, pneumonia, whatever, until there were hardly any left! He hiked his whole crew right into the ground! What is he, in his sixties? And here all these young agents were dropping like flies while he motored right on up to Kala Pattar, and Everest Base Camp too. I love it!"

"That's great," I said. "I'm happy for him. But now they're back."

"Yeah, they're doing the Kathmandu culture scene for a bit."

"That's too bad."

"Ah! No luck getting a key to the yeti's room, is that it?"

"Shhhhh," Nathan hissed.

"Sorry, I forgot. Well, we'll just have to think of something else, eh? The Carters are going to be here another week."

"The windows?" I asked.

Freds shook his head. "I could climb up to them no problem, but the ones to their room overlook the garden and it wouldn't be all that private."

"God, this is bad," Nathan said, and downed his Scotch. "Phil could decide to reveal the—what he's got, at a press conference while the Carters are here. Perfect way to get enhanced publicity fast—that would be just like him."

We sat and thought about it for a couple of drinks.

"You know, Nathan," I said slowly, "there's an angle we haven't discussed yet, that you'd have to take the lead in."

"What's that?"

"Sarah."

"What? Oh, no. No. I couldn't. I can't talk to her, really. It just—well, I just don't want to."

"But why?"

"She wouldn't care what I said." He looked down at his glass and swirled the contents nervously. His voice turned bitter: "She'd probably just tell Phil we were here, and then we'd *really* be in trouble."

"Oh, I don't know. I don't think she's the kind of person to do that, do you, Freds?"

"I don't know," Freds said, surprised. "I never met her."

"She couldn't be, surely." And I kept after him for the rest of our stay, figuring it was our best chance at that point. But Nathan was stubborn about it, and still hadn't budged when he insisted we leave.

So we paid the bill and took off. But we were crossing the foyer, and

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near the broad set of front doors, when Nathan suddenly stopped in his tracks. A tall, good-looking woman with large owl-eye glasses had just walked in. Nathan was stuck in place. I guessed who the woman must be, and nudged him. "Remember what's at stake."

A good point to make. He took a deep breath. And as the woman was about to pass us, he whipped off his hat and shades. "Sarah!"

The woman jumped back. "Nathan! My God! What—what are you doing here!"

Darkly: "You know why I'm here, Sarah." He drew himself up even straighter than usual, and glared at her. If she'd been convicted of murdering his mother I don't think he could have looked more accusing.

"What—?" Her voice quit on her.

Nathan's lip curled disdainfully. I thought he was kind of overdoing the laying-on-of-guilt trip, and I was even thinking of stepping in and trying a less confrontational approach, but then right in the middle of the next sentence his voice twisted with real pain: "I didn't think you'd be capable of this, Sarah."

With her light brown hair, bangs, and big glasses, she had a schoolgirlish look. Now that schoolgirl was hurting; her lip quivered, she blinked rapidly; "I—I—" And then her face crumpled, and with a little cry she tottered toward Nathan and collapsed against his broad shoulder. He patted her head, looking flabbergasted.

"Oh, Nathan," she said miserably, sniffing. "It's so *awful*. . . ."

"It's all right," he said, stiff as a board. "I know."

The two of them communed for a while. I cleared my throat. "Why don't we go somewhere else and have a drink," I suggested, feeling that things were looking up a trifle.

VI

We went to the Hotel Annapurna coffee shop, and there Sarah confirmed all of Nathan's worst fears. "They've got him in there locked in the *bathroom*." Apparently the yeti was eating less and less, and Valerie Budge was urging Mr. Fitzgerald to take him out to the city's funky little zoo immediately, but Fitzgerald was flying in a group of science and nature writers so he could hold a press conference, the next day or the day after that, and he and Phil wanted to wait. They were hoping for the Carters' presence at the unveiling, as Freds called it, but they couldn't be sure about that yet.

Freds and I asked Sarah questions about the set-up at the hotel. Apparently Phil, Valerie Budge, and Fitzgerald were taking turns in a continuous watch on the bathroom. How did they feed him? How docile

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was he? Question, answer, question, answer. After her initial breakdown, Sarah proved to be a tough and sensible character. Nathan, on the other hand, spent the time repeating, "We've got to get him out of there, we've got to do it soon, it'll be the *end* of him." Sarah's hand on his just fueled the flame. "We'll just have to *rescue* him."

"I know, Nathan," I said, trying to think. "We know that already." A plan was beginning to fall into place in my mind. "Sarah, you've got a key to the room?" She nodded. "Okay, let's go."

"What, now?" Nathan cried.

"Sure! We're in a hurry, right? They're going to notice Sarah is gone, and these reporters are going to arrive. . . . And we've got to get some stuff together, first."

VII

When we returned to the Sheraton it was late afternoon. Freds and I were on rented bikes, and Nathan and Sarah followed in a taxi. We made sure our cabbie understood that we wanted him to wait for us out front; then Freds and I went inside, gave the all-clear to Nathan and Sarah, and headed straight for the lobby phones. Nathan and Sarah went to the front desk and checked into a room; we needed them out of sight for a while.

I called all the rooms on the top floor of the hotel (the fourth), and sure enough half of them were occupied by Americans. I explained that I was J. Reeves Fitzgerald, assistant to the Carters, who were fellow guests in the hotel. They all knew about the Carters. I explained that the Carters were hosting a small reception for the Americans at the hotel, and we hoped that they would join us in the casino bar when it was convenient—the Carters would be down in an hour or so. They were all delighted at the invitation (except for one surly Republican that I had to cut off), and they promised to be down shortly.

The last call got Phil Adrakian, in room 355; I identified myself as Lionel Hodding. It went as well as the others; if anything Adrakian was even more enthusiastic. "We'll be right down, thanks—we have a reciprocal invitation to make, actually." I was prejudiced, but he did sound like a pain. Nathan's epithet, *theorist,* didn't really make it for me; I preferred something along the lines of, say, *asshole.*

"Fine. Look forward to seeing all your party, of course."

Freds and I waited in the bar and watched the elevators. Americans in their safari best began to pile out and head for the casino; you wouldn't have thought there was that much polyester in all Kathmandu, but I guess it travels well.

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Two men and a plump woman came down the broad stairs beside the elevator. "Them?" Freds asked. I nodded; they fitted Sarah's descriptions exactly. Phil Adrakian was shortish, slim, and good-looking in a California Golden Boy kind of way. Valerie Budge wore glasses and had a lot of curly hair pulled up; somehow she looked intellectual where Sarah only looked studious. The money man, J. Reeves Fitzgerald, was sixtyish and very fit-looking, though he did smoke a cigar. He wore a safari jacket with eight pockets on it. Adrakian was arguing a point with him as they crossed the foyer to the casino bar, and I heard him say, "*better* than a press conference."

I had a final inspiration and returned to the phones. I asked the hotel operator for Jimmy Carter, and got connected; but the phone was answered by a flat Midwestern voice, very businesslike indeed. "Hello?"

"Hello, is this the Carters' suite?"

"May I ask who's speaking?"

"This is J. Reeves Fitzgerald. I'd like you to inform the Carters that the Americans in the Sheraton have organized a reception for them in the hotel's casino bar, for this afternoon."

". . . I'm not sure their scheduling will allow them to attend."

"I understand. But if you'd just let them know."

"Of course."

Back to Freds, where I downed a Star beer in two gulps. "Well," I said, "*something* should happen. Let's get up there."

VIII

I gave Nathan and Sarah a buzz and they joined us at the door of Room 355. Sarah let us in. Inside was a big suite—style, generic Holiday Inn—it could have been in any city on Earth. Except that there was a slight smell of wet fur.

Sarah went to the bathroom door, unlocked it. There was a noise inside. Nathan, Freds, and I shifted around behind her uncomfortably. She opened the door. There was a movement, and there he was, standing before us. I found myself staring into the eyes of the yeti.

In the Kathmandu tourist scene, there are calendars, postcards, and embroidered T-shirts with a drawing of a yeti on them. It's always the same drawing, which I could never understand; why should everyone agree to use the same guess? It annoyed me: a little furball thing with his back to you, looking over his shoulder with a standard monkey face, and displaying the bottom of one big bare foot.

I'm happy to report that the real yeti didn't look anything like that. Oh he was furry, all right; but he was about Freds' height, and had a

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distinctly humanoid face, surrounded by a beard-like ruff of matted reddish fur. He looked a little like Lincoln—a short and very ugly Lincoln, sure, with a squashed nose and rather prominent eyebrow ridges—but the resemblance was there. I was relieved to see how human his face looked; my plan depended on it, and I was glad Nathan hadn't exaggerated in his description. The only feature that really looked unusual was his occipital crest, a ridge of bone and muscle that ran fore-and-aft over the top of his head, like his skull itself had a Mohawk haircut.

Well, we were all standing there like a statue called "People Meet Yeti," when Freds decided to break the ice; he stepped forward and offered the guy a hand. "Namaste!" he said.

"No, no—" Nathan brushed by him and held out the necklace of fossil shells that he had been given in the spring.

"Is this the same one?" I croaked, momentarily at a loss. Because up until that bathroom door opened, part of me hadn't really believed in it all.

"I think so."

The yeti reached out and touched the necklace and Nathan's hand. Statue time again. Then the yeti stepped forward and touched Nathan's face with his long, furry hand. He whistled something quiet. Nathan was quivering; there were tears in Sarah's eyes. I was impressed myself. Freds said, "He looks kind of like Buddha, don't you think? He doesn't have the belly, but those eyes, man. Buddha to the max."

We got to work. I opened my pack and got out baggy overalls, a yellow "Free Tibet" T-shirt, and a large anorak. Nathan was taking his shirt off and putting it back on to show the yeti what we had in mind.

Slowly, carefully, gently, with many a soft-spoken sound and slow gesture, we got the yeti into the clothes. The T-shirt was the hardest part; he squeaked a little when we pulled it over his head. The anorak was zippered, luckily. With every move I made I said "Namaste, blessed sir, namaste."

The hands and feet were a problem. His hands were strange, fingers skinny and almost twice as long as mine, and pretty hairy as well; but wearing mittens in the daytime in Kathmandu was almost worse. I suspended judgment on them and turned to his feet. This was the only area of the tourist drawing that was close to correct; his feet were huge, furry, and just about square. He had a big toe like a very fat thumb. The boots I had brought, biggest I could find in a hurry, weren't wide enough. Eventually I put him in Tibetan wool socks and Birkenstock sandals, modified by a penknife to let the big toe hang over the side.

Lastly I put my blue Dodgers cap on his head. The cap concealed the occipital crest perfectly, and the bill did a lot to obscure his rather low forehead and prominent eyebrows. I topped everything off with a pair

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of mirrored wraparound sunglasses. "Hey, neat," Freds remarked. Also a Sherpa necklace, made of five pieces of coral and three giant chunks of rough turquoise, strung on black cord. Principle of distraction, you know.

All this time Sarah and Nathan were ransacking the drawers and luggage, stealing all the camera film and notebooks and whatever else might have contained evidence of the yeti. And throughout it all the yeti stood there, calm and attentive: watching Nathan, sticking his hand down a sleeve like a millionaire with his valet, stepping carefully into the Birkenstocks, adjusting the bill of the baseball cap, everything. I was really impressed, and so was Freds. "He really is like Buddha, isn't he?" I thought the physical resemblance was a bit muted at this point, but his attitude couldn't have been more mellow if he'd been the Gautama himself.

When Nathan and Sarah were done searching they looked up at our handiwork. "*God* he looks weird," Sarah said.

Nathan just sat on the bed and put his head in his hands. "It'll never work," he said. "Never."

"Sure it will!" Freds exclaimed, zipping the anorak up a little further. "You see people on Freak Street looking like this all the time! Man, when I went to school I played football with a whole *team* of guys that looked just like him! Fact is, in my state he could run for *Senator*—"

"Whoah, whoah," I said. "No time to waste, here. Give me the scissors and brush, I still have to do his hair." I tried brushing it over his ears with little success, then gave him a trim in back. One trip, I was thinking, just one short walk down to a taxi. And in pretty dark halls. "Is it even on both sides?"

"For God's sake, George, let's go!" Nathan was getting antsy, and we had been a while. We gathered our belongings, filled the packs, and tugged old Buddha out into the hall.

IX

I have always prided myself on my sense of timing. Many's the time I've surprised myself by how perfectly I've managed to be in the right place at the right time; it goes beyond all conscious calculation, into deep mystic communion with the cycles of the cosmos, etc., etc. But apparently in this matter I was teamed up with people whose sense of timing was so cosmically awful that mine was completely swamped. That's the only way I can explain it.

Because there we were, escorting a yeti down the hallway of the Everest Sheraton International, and we were walking casually along, the yeti

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kind of bowlegged—very bowlegged—and long-armed, too—so that I kept worrying he might drop to all fours—but otherwise, passably normal. Just an ordinary group of tourists in Nepal. We decided on the stairs, to avoid any awkward elevator crowds, and stepped through the swinging doors into the stairwell. And there coming down the stairs toward us were Jimmy Carter, Rosalynn Carter, and five Secret Service men.

"Well!" Freds exclaimed. "Damned if it isn't Jimmy Carter! And Rosalynn too!"

I suppose that was the best way to play it, not that Freds was doing anything but being natural. I don't know if the Carters were on their way to something else, or if they were actually coming down to attend my reception; if the latter, then my last-minute inspiration to invite them had been really a bad one. In any case, there they were, and they stopped on the landing. We stopped on the landing. The Secret Service men, observing us closely, stopped on the landing.

What to do? Jimmy gave us his famous smile, and it might as well have been the cover of *Time* magazine, it was such a familiar sight; just the same. Only not quite. Not exactly. His face was older, naturally, but also it had the look of someone who had survived a serious illness, or a great natural disaster. It looked like he had been through the fire, and come back into the world knowing more than most people about what the fire was. It was a good face, it showed what a man could endure. And he was relaxed; this kind of interruption was part of daily life, part of the job he had volunteered for nine years before.

I was anything but relaxed. In fact, as the Secret Service men did their hawk routine on Buddha, their gazes locked, I could feel my heart stop, and I had to give my torso a little twist to get it started up again. Nathan had stopped breathing from the moment he saw Carter, and he was turning white above the sharp line of his beard. It was getting worse by the second when Freds stepped forward and extended a hand. "Hey, Mr. Carter, namaste! We're happy to meet you."

"Hi, how are y'all." More of the famous smile. "Where are y'all from?"

And we answered "Arkansas," "California," "M-Massachusetts," "Oregon," and at each one he smiled and nodded with recognition and pleasure, and Rosalynn smiled and said "Hello, hello," with that faint look I had seen before during the Presidential years, that seemed to say she would have been just as happy somewhere else, and we all shuffled around so that we could all shake hands with Jimmy—until it was Buddha's turn.

"This is our guide, B—Badim Badur," I said. "He doesn't speak any English."

"I understand," Jimmy said. And he took Buddha's hand and pumped it up and down.

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Now, I had opted to leave Buddha barehanded, a decision I began to seriously regret. Here we had a man who had shaken at least a million hands in his life, maybe ten million; nobody in the whole world could have been more of an expert at it. And as soon as he grasped Buddha's long skinny hand, he knew that something was different. This wasn't like any of the millions of other hands he had shaken before. A couple of furrows joined the network of fine wrinkles around his eyes, and he looked closer at Buddha's peculiar get-up. I could feel the sweat popping out and beading on my forehead. "Um, Badim's a bit shy," I was saying, when suddenly the yeti squeaked.

"Naa-maas-tayy," it said, in a hoarse, whispery voice.

"Namaste!" Jimmy replied, grinning the famous grin.

And that, folks, was the first recorded conversation between yeti and human.

Of course Buddha had only been trying to help—I'm sure of that, given what happened later—but despite all we did to conceal it, his speech had obviously surprised us pretty severely. As a result the Secret Service guys were about to go cross-eyed checking us out, Buddha in particular.

"Let's let these folks get on with things," I said shakily, and took Buddha by the arm. "Nice to meet you," I said to the Carters. We all hung there for a moment. It didn't seem polite to precede the ex-President of the United States down a flight of stairs, but the Secret Service men damn well didn't want us *following* them down either; so finally I took the lead, with Buddha by the arm, and I held onto him tight as we descended.

We reached the foyer without incident. Sarah conversed brightly with the Secret Service men who were right behind us, and she distracted their attention very successfully, I thought. It appeared we would escape the situation without further difficulties, when the doors to the casino bar swung back, and Phil Adrakian, J. Reeves Fitzgerald, and Valerie Budge walked out. (Timing, anyone?)

Adrakian took in the situation at a glance. "They're kidnapping him!" he yelled, "Hey! *Kidnapping!*"

Well, you might just as well have put jumper cables on those Secret Service agents. After all, it's kind of a question why anyone would want to assassinate an ex-president, but as a hostage for ransom or whatnot, you've got a prime target. They moved like mongooses to surround the Carters and back them off, pistols instantly in hands. Freds and I were trying to back Buddha out the front doors without actually moving our legs; we weren't making much progress, and I don't doubt we could've gotten shot for our efforts, if it weren't for Sarah. She jumped right out in front of the charging Adrakian and blocked him off.

"*You're* the kidnapper, you liar," she cried, and slapped him in the face

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so hard he staggered. *"Help!"* she demanded of the Secret Service guys, blushing bright red and shoving Valerie Budge back into Fitzgerald. She looked so tousled and embattled and beautiful that the agents were confused; the situation wasn't at all clear. Freds, Buddha, and I bumped out the front door and ran for it.

Our taxi was gone. "Shit," I said. No time to think—"The bikes?" Freds asked.

"Yep." No other choice—we ran around the side of the building and unlocked our two bikes. I got on mine and Freds helped Buddha onto the little square rack over the back wheel. People around front were shouting, and I thought I heard Adrakian among them. Freds gave me a push from behind and we were off; I stood to pump up some speed, and we wavered side to side precariously.

I headed up the road to the north. It was just wider than one lane, half-paved and half-dirt. Bike and car traffic on it was heavy, as usual, and between dodging vehicles and potholes, looking back for pursuers, and keeping the bike from tipping under Buddha's shifting weight, I was kept pretty busy.

The bike was a standard Kathmandu rental, Hero Jet by brand name: heavy frame, thick tires, low handlebars, one speed. It braked when you pedaled backwards, and had one handbrake, and it had a big loud bell, which is a crucial piece of equipment. This bike wasn't a bad specimen either, in that the handbrake worked and the handlebars weren't loose and the seat wasn't putting a spring through my ass. But the truth is, the Hero Jet is a solo vehicle. And Buddha was no lightweight. He was built like a cat, dense and compact, and I bet he weighed over two hundred pounds. With him on back, the rear tire was squashed flat—there was about an eighth of an inch clearance between rim and ground, and every time I misnavigated a pothole there was an ugly *thump,* as we bottomed out.

So we weren't breaking any speed records, and when we turned left on Dilli Bazar Freds shouted from behind, "They're after us! See, there's that Adrakian and some others in a taxi!"

Sure enough, back a couple hundred yards was Phil Adrakian, hanging out the side window of a little white Toyota taxi, screaming at us. We pedaled over the Dhobi Khola bridge and shot by the Central Immigration building before I could think of anything to yell that might have brought the crowd there into the street. "Freds!" I said, panting. "Make a diversion! Tie up traffic!"

"Right on." Without a pause he braked to a halt in the middle of the road, jumped off and threw his Hero Jet to the pavement. The three-wheeled motorcab behind him ran over it before the driver could stop. Freds screamed abuse, he pulled the bike out and slung it under a Datsun

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going the other way, which crunched it and screeched to a halt. More abuse from Freds, who ran around pulling the drivers from their vehicles, shouting at them with all the Nepali he knew: "Chiso howa!" (Cold wind.) "Tato pani!" (Hot water.) "Rhamrao dihn!" (Nice day.)

I only caught glimpses of this as I biked away, but I saw he had bought a little time and I concentrated on negotiating the traffic. Dilli Bazar is one of the most congested streets in Kathmandu, which is really saying a lot.

The two narrow lanes are fronted by three-story buildings containing grocery markets and fabric wholesalers, which open directly onto the street and use it for cash register lines and so on, despite the fact that it's a major truck route.

Add to that the usual number of dogs, goats, chickens, taxis, young schoolgirls walking three abreast with their arms linked, pedicabs with five foot-tall operators pedaling whole families along at two miles an hour, and the occasional wandering sacred cow, and you can see the extent of the problem. Not only that, but the potholes are fierce—some could be mistaken for open manholes.

And the hills! I was doing all right until that point, weaving through the crowd and ringing my bell to the point of thumb cramp. But then Buddha shook my arm and I looked back and saw that Adrakian had somehow gotten past Freds and hired another taxi, and he was trailing us again, stuck behind a colorfully painted bus some distance back. And we were starting up the first of three fairly steep up-and-downs that Dilli Bazar makes before it reaches the city center.

Hero Jets are not made for hills. The city residents get off theirs and walk them up inclines like that one, and only Westerners, still in a hurry even in Nepal, stay on and grind up the slopes. I was certainly a Westerner in a hurry that day, and I stood up and started pumping away. But it was heavy going, especially after I had to brake to a dead stop to avoid an old man blowing his nose with his finger. Adrakian's taxi had rounded the bus, in an explosion of honks, and he was gaining on us fast. I sat back on the seat, huffing and puffing, legs like big blocks of wood, and it was looking like I'd have to find a diplomatic solution to the problem, when suddenly both my feet were kicked forward off the pedals; we surged forward, just missing a pedicab.

Buddha had taken over. He was holding onto the seat with both hands, and pedaling from behind. I had seen tall Westerners ride their rental bikes like that before, to keep from smashing their knees into the handlebars on every upswing. But you can't get much downthrust from back there, and you didn't ever see them doing that while biking uphill. For Buddha, this was not a problem. I mean this guy was *strong*. He pumped away so hard that the poor Hero Jet squeaked under the strain, and we

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surged up the hill and flew down the other side like we had jumped onto a motorcycle.

A motorcycle without brakes, I should add. Buddha did not seem up on the theory of the footbrake, and I tried the handbrake once or twice and found that it only squealed like a pig and reduced our stability a bit. So as we fired down Dilli Bazar I could only put my feet up on the frame and dodge obstacles, as in one of those race-car video games. I rang the bell for all it was worth, and spent a lot of time in the right lane heading at oncoming traffic (they drive on the left).

Out the corner of my eye I saw pedestrians goggling at us as we flew by; then the lanes ahead cleared as we rounded a semi, and I saw we were approaching the "Traffic Engineers' Intersection," usually one of my favorites. Here Dilli Bazar crosses another major street, and the occasion is marked by four traffic lights, all four of them *permanently green twenty-four hours a day.*

This time there was a cow for a traffic cop. "Bistarre!" (slowly!) I yelled, but Buddha's vocabulary apparently remained restricted to "Namaste," and he pedaled right on. I charted a course, clamped down the handbrake, crouched over the handlebars, rang the bell.

We shot the gap between a speeding cab and the traffic cow, with three inches to spare on each side, and were through the intersection before I even had time to blink. No problem. Now *that's* timing.

After that, it was just a matter of navigation. I took us the wrong way up the one-way section of Durbar Marg, to shorten our trip and throw off pursuit for good, and having survived that it was simple to make it the rest of the way to Thamel.

As we approached Thamel, we passed the grounds of the King's Palace; as I mentioned, the tall trees there are occupied day and night by giant brown bats, hanging head down from the bare upper branches. As we passed the palace, those bats must have caught the scent of the yeti, or something; because all of a sudden the whole flock of them burst off the branches, squeaking like my handbrake and flapping their big skin wings like a hundred little Draculas. Buddha slowed to stare up at the sight, and everyone else on the block, even the cow on the corner, stopped and looked up as well, to watch that cloud of bats fill the sky.

It's moments like that that make me love Kathmandu.

In Thamel, we fit right in. A remarkable number of people on the street looked a lot like Buddha—so much so that the notion hit me that the city was being secretly infiltrated by yeti in disguise. I chalked the notion up to hysteria caused by the Traffic Engineers' Intersection, and directed our Hero Jet into the Hotel Star courtyard. At that point walls surrounded us and Buddha consented to stop pedaling. We got off the bike, and shakily I led him upstairs to my room.

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X

So. We had liberated the imprisoned yeti. Although I had to admit, as I locked us both into my room, that he was only partway free. Getting him completely free, back on his home ground, might turn out to be a problem. I still didn't know exactly where his home was, but they don't rent cars in Kathmandu, and the bus rides, no matter the destination, are long and crowded. Would Buddha be able to hold it together for ten hours in a crowded bus? Well, knowing him, he probably would. But would his disguise hold up? That was doubtful.

Meanwhile, there was the matter of Adrakian and the Secret Service being on to us. I had no idea what had happened to Nathan and Sarah and Freds, and I worried about them, especially Nathan and Sarah. I wished they would arrive. Now that we were here and settled, I felt a little uncomfortable with my guest; with him in there, my room felt awfully small.

I went in the bathroom and peed. Buddha came in and watched me, and when I was done he found the right buttons on the overalls, and did the same thing! The guy was amazingly smart. Another point—I don't know whether to mention this—but in the hominid-versus-primate debate, I've heard it said that most primate male genitals are quite small, and that human males are by far the size champs in that category. Hurray for us. But Buddha, I couldn't help noticing, was more on the human side of the scale. Really, the evidence was adding up. The yeti was a hominid, and a highly intelligent hominid at that. Buddha's quick understanding, his rapid adaptation to changing situations, his recognition of friends and enemies, his *cool,* all indicated smarts of the first order.

Of course, it made sense. How else could they have stayed concealed so well for so long? They must have taught their young all the tricks, generation to generation; keeping close track of all tools or artifacts, hiding their homes in the most hard-to-find caves, avoiding all human settlements, practicing burial of the dead. . . .

Then it occurred to me to wonder: if the yeti were so smart, and so good at concealment, why was old Buddha here with me in my room? What had gone wrong? Why had he revealed himself to Nathan, and how had Adrakian managed to capture him?

I found myself speculating on the incidence of mental illness among the yeti . . . a train of thought that made me even more anxious for Nathan's arrival. Nathan was not a whole lot of help in some situations, but the man had a rapport with the yeti that I sadly lacked.

Buddha was crouched on the bed, hunched over his knees, staring at me brightly. We had taken his sunglasses off on arrival, but the Dodger

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cap was still on. He looked observant, curious, puzzled. What next? he seemed to say. Something in his expression, something about the way he was coping with it all, was both brave and pathetic—it made me feel for him. "Hey, guy. We'll get you back up there. Namaste."

He formed the words with his lips. Namaste. I salute the spirit within you. Always one of my favorite greetings. Namaste, Mr. Yeti!

Perhaps he was hungry. What do you feed a hungry yeti? Was he vegetarian, carnivorous? I didn't have much there in the room: some packages of curried chicken soup, some candy (would sugar be bad for him?), beef jerky, yeah, a possibility; Nebico malt biscuits, which were little cookie-wafers made in Nepal. . . . I opened a package of these and one of jerky, and offered some to him.

He sat back on the bed and crossed his legs in front of him. He tapped the bed as if to indicate my spot. I sat down on the bed across from him. He took a stick of jerky in his long fingers, sniffed it, stuck it between his toes. I ate mine for example. He looked at me as if I'd just used the wrong fork for the salad. He began with a Nebico wafer, chewing it slowly. I found I was hungry, and from the roundness of his eyes I think he felt the same. But he was cool; there was a procedure here, he had me know; he handled all the wafers carefully first, sniffed them, ate them very slowly; took the jerky from between his toes, tried half of it; looked around the room, or at me, chewing very slowly. So calm, so peaceful he was! I decided the candy would be okay, and offered him the bag of jelly beans. He tried one and his eyebrows lifted; he picked one of the same color (green) from the bag, and gave it to me.

Pretty soon we had all the food I owned scattered out there on the bed between us, and we tried first one thing and then another, in silence, as slowly and solemnly as if it were all some sacred ritual. And you know, after a while I felt just like it was.

XI

About an hour after our meal Nathan, Sarah, and Freds all arrived at once. "You're here!" they cried. "All right, George! Way to go!"

"Thank Buddha," I said. "He got us here."

Nathan and Buddha went through a little hand shake with the fossil shell necklace. Freds and Sarah told me the story of their adventures. Sarah had fought with Adrakian, who escaped her and ran after us, and then with Valerie Budge, who stayed behind with Fitzgerald, to trade blows and accusations. "It was a joy to pound on her, she's been coming on to Phil for months now—not that I care anymore, of course," Sarah added quickly as Nathan eyed her. Anyway, she had pushed and shoved

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and denounced Budge and Fitzgerald and Adrakian, and by the time she was done no one at the Sheraton had the slightest idea what was going on. A couple of Secret Service men had gone after Adrakian; the rest contented themselves with shielding the Carters, who were being called on by both sides to judge the merits of the case. Naturally the Carters were reluctant to do this. Fitzgerald and Budge didn't want to come right out and say they had had a yeti stolen from them, so they were hamstrung; and when Freds returned to see what was up, Nathan and Sarah had already ordered a cab. "I think the Carters ended up on our side," Sarah said with satisfaction.

"All well and good," added Freds, "but there I had old Jimmy right at hand, no yeti to keep me polite, and man I had a bone to pick with that guy! I was in San Diego in 1980 and along about six o'clock on election day me and a bunch of friends were going down to vote and I argued *heavily* with them that we should vote for Carter rather than Anderson, because Anderson would just be a gesture whereas I thought Carter might still have a chance to win, since I don't believe in polls. I really went at it and I convinced every one of them, probably the peak of my political career, and then when we got home and turned on the TV we found out that Carter had already conceded the election a couple of hours before! My friends were so mad at me! John Drummond threw his beer at me and hit me right here. In fact they soaked me. So I had a bone to pick with old Jimmy, you bet, and I was going to go up to him and ask him why he had done such a thing. But he was looking kind of confused by all the ruckus, so I decided not to."

"The truth is I dragged him away before he could," said Sarah.

Nathan got us back to the problem at hand. "We've still got to get the yeti out of Kathmandu, and Adrakian knows we've got him—he'll be searching for us. How are we going to do it?"

"I've got a plan," I said. Because after my meal with Buddha I had been thinking. "Now where is Buddha's home? I need to know."

Nathan told me.

I consulted my maps. Buddha's valley was pretty near the little airstrip at J—. I nodded. "Okay, here's how we'll do it. . . ."

XII

I spent most of the next day through the looking glass, inside the big headquarters of the Royal Nepali Airline Company, getting four tickets for the following day's flight to J—. Tough work, even though as far as I could tell the plane wasn't even close to sold out. J— wasn't near any trekking routes, and it wasn't a popular destination. But that doesn't

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mean anything at RNAC. Their purpose as a company, as far as I can tell, is not so much to fly people places as it is to *make lists*. Waiting lists. I would call it their secret agenda, only it's no secret.

Patience, a very low-keyed pig-headedness, and lots of baksheesh are the keys to getting from the lists to the status of ticket-holder; I managed it, and in one day too. So I was pleased, but I called my friend Bill, who works in one of the city's travel agencies, to establish a little back-up plan. He's good at those, having a lot of experience with RNAC. Then I completed the rest of my purchases, at my favorite climbing outfitters in Thamel. The owner, a Tibetan woman, put down her copy of *The Far Pavilions* and stopped doing her arm aerobics, and got me all the clothes I asked for, in all the right colors. The only thing she couldn't find me was another Dodgers cap, but I got a dark blue "ATOM" baseball cap instead.

I pointed at it. "What is this 'ATOM,' anyway?" Because there were caps and jackets all over Nepal with that one word on them. Was it a company, and if so, what kind?

She shrugged. "Nobody knows."

Extensive advertising for an unknown product: yet another Great Mystery of Nepal. I stuffed my new belongings into my backpack and left. I was on my way home, when I noticed someone dodging around the crowd behind me. Just a glance and I spotted him, nipping into a newsstand: Phil Adrakian.

Now I couldn't go home, not straight home. So I went to the Kathmandu Guest House, next door, and told one of the snooty clerks there that Jimmy Carter would be visiting in ten minutes and his secretary would be arriving very shortly. I walked through into the pretty garden that gives the Guest House so many of its pretensions, and hopped over a low spot in the back wall. Down a empty garbage alley, around the corner, over another wall, and past the Lodge Pleasant or Pheasant into the Star's courtyard. I was feeling pretty covert and all when I saw one of the Carters' Secret Service men, standing in front of the Tantric Used Book Store. Since I was already in the courtyard, I went ahead and hurried on up to my room.

XIII

"I think they must have followed you here," I told our little group. "I suppose they might think we really were trying a kidnapping yesterday."

Nathan groaned. "Adrakian probably convinced them we're part of that group that bombed the Hotel Annapurna this summer."

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"That should reassure them," I said. "When that happened the opposition group immediately wrote to the King and told him they were suspending all operations against the government until the criminal element among them was captured by the authorities."

"Buddhist guerrillas are heavy, aren't they?" said Freds.

"Anyway," I said, "all this means is that we have a damn good reason to put our plan into effect. Freds, are you sure you're up for it?"

"Sure I'm sure! It sounds like fun."

"All right. We'd better all stay here tonight, just in case. I'll cook up some chicken soup."

So we had a spartan meal of curried chicken soup, Nebico wafers, Toblerone white chocolate, jelly beans, and iodinated Tang. When Nathan saw the way Buddha went for the jelly beans, he shook his head. "We've got to get him out of here *fast*."

When we settled down, Sarah took the bed, and Buddha immediately joined her, with a completely innocent look in his eye, as if to say: Who, me? This is just where I sleep, right? I could see Nathan was a bit suspicious of this, worried about the old Fay Wray complex maybe, and in fact Nathan curled up on the foot of the bed. I assume there weren't any problems. Freds and I threw down the mildewed foam pads I owned and lay down on the floor.

"Don't you think Buddha is sure to get freaked by the flight tomorrow?" Sarah asked when the lights were off.

"Nothing's seemed to bother him much so far," I said. But I wondered; I don't like flying myself.

"Yeah, but this isn't remotely like anything he's ever done before."

"Standing on a high ridge is kind of like flying. Compared to our bike ride it should be easy."

"I'm not so sure," Nathan said, worried again. "Sarah may be right—flying can be upsetting even for people who know what it is."

"That's usually the heart of the problem," I said, with feeling.

Freds cut through the debate: "I say we should get him stoned before the flight. Get a hash pipe going good and just get him *wasted*."

"You're crazy!" Nathan said. "That'd just freak him out more!"

"Nah."

"He wouldn't know what to make of it," Sarah said.

"Oh yeah?" Freds propped himself up on one arm. "You really think those yetis have lived all this time up there among all those pot plants, and haven't figured them out? No way! In fact that's probably why no one ever sees them! They're immobilized! Because man, the pot plants up there are as big as *pine trees*. They probably use the buds for food."

Nathan and Sarah doubted that, and they further doubted that we should do any experimenting about it at such a crucial time.

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"You got any hash?" I asked Freds with interest.

"Nope. Before this Ama Dablam climb came through I was going to fly to Malaysia to join a jungle mountain expedition that Doug Scott put together, you know? So I got rid of it all. I mean, do you fly drugs into Malaysia is not one of the harder questions on the IQ test, you know? In fact I had too much to smoke in the time I had left, and when I was hiking down from Namche to Lukla I was loading my pipe and dropped this chunk on the ground, a really monster chunk, about ten grams. *And I just left it there!* Just left it lying on the ground! I've always wanted to do that.

"Anyway, I'm out. I could fix that in about fifteen minutes down on the street if you want me to, though—"

"No, no. That's okay." I could already hear the steady breathing of Buddha, fast asleep above me. "He'll be more relaxed than any of us tomorrow." And that was true.

XIV

We got up before dawn, and Freds dressed in the clothes that Buddha had worn the day before. We pasted some swatches of Buddha's back fur onto Fred's face to serve as a beard. We even had some of the russet fur taped to the inside of the Dodger Cap, so it hung down behind. With mittens on, and a big pair of snow boots, he was covered; slip the shades onto his nose and he looked at least as weird as Buddha had in the Sheraton. Freds walked around the room a bit, trying it out. Buddha watched him with that surprised look of his, and it cracked Freds up. "I look like your long-lost brother, hey Buddha?"

Nathan collapsed on the bed despondently. "This just isn't going to work."

"That's what you said last time," I objected.

"Exactly! And look what happened! You call that *working?* Are you telling me that things *worked* yesterday?"

"Well, it depends on what you mean when you say *worked.* I mean here we are, right?" I began packing my gear. "Relax, Nathan." I put a hand on his shoulder, and Sarah put both her hands on his other shoulder. He bucked up a bit, and I smiled at Sarah. That woman was tough; she had saved our ass at the Sheraton, and she kept her nerve well during the waiting, too. I wouldn't have minded asking her on a long trek into the Himal myself, really, and she saw that and gave me a brief smile of appreciation that also said, no chance. Besides, double-crossing old Nathan would have been like the Dodgers giving away Steve Garvey. People

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like that you can't double-cross, not if you want to look yourself in the mirror.

Freds finished getting pointers in carriage from Buddha, and he and I walked out of the room. Freds stopped and looked back inside mournfully, and I tugged him along, irritated at the Method acting; we wouldn't be visible to anyone outside the Star until we got downstairs.

But I must say that overall Freds did an amazing job. He hadn't seen all that much of Buddha, and yet when he walked across that courtyard and into the street, he caught the yeti's gait exactly: a bit stiff-hipped and bowlegged, a rolling sailor's walk from which he could drop to all fours instantly, or so it seemed. I could hardly believe it.

The streets were nearly empty: a bread truck, scavenging dogs (they passed Freds without even a glance—would that give us away?), the old beggar and his young daughter, a few coffee freaks outside the German Pumpernickel Bakery, shopkeepers opening up. . . . Near the Star we passed a parked taxi with three men in it, carefully looking the other way. Westerners. I hurried on. "Contact," I muttered to Freds. He just whistled a little.

There was one taxi in Times Square, the driver asleep. We hopped in and woke him, and asked him to take us to the Central Bus Stop. The taxi we had passed followed us. "Hooked," I said to Freds, who was sniffing the ashtrays, tasting the upholstery, learning out the window to eat the wind like a dog. "Try not to overdo it," I said, worried about my Dodgers cap with all that hair taped in it flying away.

We passed the big clock tower and stopped, got out and paid the cabbie. Our tail stopped further up the block, I was pleased to see. Freds and I walked down the broad, mashed-mud driveway into Central Bus Stop.

The bus stop was a big yard of mud, about five or eight feet lower than the level of the street. Scores of buses were parked at all angles and their tires had torn the mud up until the yard looked like a vehicular Verdun. All of the buses were owned by private companies—one bus per company, usually, with a single route to run—and all of their agents at the wood-and-cloth booths at the entrance clamored for our attention, as if we might have come in without a particular destination in mind, and would pick the agent that made the loudest offer.

Actually, this time it was almost true. But I spotted the agent for the Jiri bus, which is where I had thought to send Freds, and I bought two tickets, in a crowd of all the other bus agents, who criticized my choice. Freds hunkered down a little, looking suitably distressed. A big hubbub arose; one of the companies had established its right to leave the yard next, and now its bus was trying to make it up the driveway, which was the one and only exit from the yard.

Each departure was a complete test of the driver, the bus' clutch and

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tires, and the advisory abilities of the bus agents standing around. After a lot of clutching and coaching this brightly painted bus squirted up the incline, and the scheduling debate began anew. Only three buses had unblocked access to the driveway, and the argument among their agents was fierce.

I took Freds in hand and we wandered around the track-torn mud, looking for the Jiri bus. Eventually we found it: gaily painted in yellow, blue, green and red, like all the rest, ours also had about forty decals of Ganesh stuck all over the windshield, to help the driver see. As usual, the company's "other bus" was absent, and this one was double-booked. We shoved our way on board and through the tightly packed crowd in the aisle, then found empty seats in the back. The Nepalis like to ride near the front. After more boardings, the crowd engulfed us even in the back, and it got worse after the bus attendants stored the spare tire in the aisle. But we had Freds at a window, which is what I wanted.

Through the mud-flecked glass I could just see our tail: Phil Adrakian, and two guys who might have been Secret Service men, though I wasn't sure about that. They were fending off the bus agents and trying to get into the yard at the same time, a tough combination. As they sidestepped the bus agents they got in the driveway and almost got run over by the bus currently sliding up and down the slope; Adrakian slipped in the mud scrambling away, and fell on his ass. The bus agents thought this was great. Adrakian and the other two hurried off, and squished from bus to bus trying to look like they weren't looking for anything. They were pursued by the most persistent bus agents, and got mired in the mud from time to time, and I worried after a while that they wouldn't be able to find us. In fact it took them about twenty minutes. But then Adrakian saw Freds at the window, and the three of them ducked behind a bus hulk that had sunk axle-deep, waving off the bus agents in desperate sign language. "Hooked for good," I said.

"Yeah," Freds replied without moving his lips.

The bus was now completely packed; an old woman had even been insinuated between Freds and me, which suited me fine. But it was going to be another miserable trip. "You're really doing your part for the cause," I said to Freds as I prepared to depart, thinking of the cramped day ahead of him.

"No hroblem!" he said liplessly. "I like these 'us trits!"

Somehow I believed him. I weaseled my way upright in the aisle and said good-bye. Our tails were watching the bus' only door, but that wasn't really much of a problem. I just squirmed between the Nepalis, whose concept of personal "body space" is pretty much exactly confined to the space their bodies are actually occupying—none of this eighteen-inch bullshit for them—and got to a window on the other side of the bus.

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There was no way our watchers could have seen across the interior of that bus, so I was free to act. I apologized to the Sherpa I was sitting on, worked the window open, and started to climb out it. The Sherpa very politely helped me, without the slightest suggestion I was doing anything out of the ordinary, and I jumped down into the mud. The Sherpa waved good-bye; hardly anyone else on the bus even noticed my departure. I snuck through the no-man's land of the back buses. Quickly enough I was back on Durbar Marg and in a cab on my way to the Star.

XV

I got the cabbie to park almost inside the Star's lobby, and Buddha barreled into the backseat like a fullback hitting the line. While we drove he kept his head down, just in case, and the taxi took us out to the airport.

Things were proceeding exactly according to my plan, and you might imagine I was feeling pretty pleased, but the truth is that I was more nervous than I'd been all morning. Because we were walking up to the RNAC desk, you see. . . .

When I got there and inquired, the clerk told us our flight had been canceled for the day.

"What?" I cried. "Canceled! What for?"

Now, our counter agent was the most beautiful woman in the world. This happens all the time in Nepal—in the country you pass a farmer bent over pulling up rice, and she looks up and it's a face from the cover of *Cosmopolitan,* only twice as pretty and without the vampire makeup. This ticket clerk could have made a million modeling in New York, but she didn't speak much English, and when I asked her "What for?" she said, "It's raining," and looked past me for another customer.

I took a deep breath. Remember, I thought: RNAC. What would the Red Queen say? I pointed out the window. "It's not raining. Take a look."

Too much for her. "It's raining," She repeated. She looked around for her supervisor, and he came on over; a thin Hindu man with a red dot on his forehead. He nodded curtly. "It's raining up at J—."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, I got a report on the shortwave from J—, and besides you can look north and see for yourself. It's not raining."

"The airstrip at J— is too wet to land on," he said.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but you landed there twice yesterday, and it hasn't rained since."

"We're having mechanical trouble with the plane."

"I'm sorry, but you've got a whole fleet of small planes out there, and when one has a problem you just substitute for it. I know, I switched

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planes three times here once." Nathan and Sarah didn't look too happy to hear that one.

The supervisor's supervisor was drawn by the conversation: another serious, slender Hindu. "The flight is canceled," he said. "It's political."

I shook my head. "RNAC pilots only strike the flights to Lukla and Pokhara—they're the only ones that have enough passengers for the strike to matter." My fears concerning the real reason for the cancellation were being slowly confirmed. "How many passengers on this flight?"

All three of them shrugged. "The flight is canceled," the first supervisor said. "Try tomorrow."

And I knew I was right. They had less than half capacity, and were waiting until tomorrow so the flight would be full. (Maybe more than full, but did they care?) I explained the situation to Nathan and Sarah and Buddha, and Nathan stormed back to the desk demanding that the flight fly as scheduled, and the supervisors had their eyebrows raised like they might actually get some fun out of this after all, but I hauled him away. While I was dialing my friend in the travel agency, I explained to him how maddening irate customers had been made into a sport (or maybe an art form) by Asian bureaucrats. After three tries I got my friend's office. The receptionist answered and said, "Yeti Travels?" which gave me a start; I'd forgotten the company's name. Then Bill got on and I outlined the situation. "Filling planes again, are they?" He laughed. "I'll call in that group of six we 'sold' yesterday, and you should be off."

"Thanks, Bill." I gave it fifteen minutes, during which time Sarah and I calmed Nathan, and Buddha stood at the window staring at the planes taking off and landing. "We've got to get out today!" Nathan kept repeating. "They'll never go for another ruse after today!"

"We know that already, Nathan."

I returned to the desk. "I'd like to get boarding passes for flight 2 to J—, please?"

She made out the boarding passes. The two supervisors stood off behind a console, studiously avoiding my gaze. Normally it wouldn't have gotten to me, but with the pressure to get Buddha out I was a little edgy. When I had the passes in hand I said to the clerk, loud enough for the supervisors to hear, "No more cancellation, eh?"

"Cancellation?"

I gave up on it.

XVI

Of course a boarding pass is only a piece of paper, and when only eight passengers got on the little two-engine plane, I got nervous again; but

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we took off right on schedule. When the plane left the ground I sat back in my chair, and the relief blew through me like wash from the props. I hadn't known how nervous I was until that moment. Nathan and Sarah were squeezing hands and grinning in the seats ahead, and Buddha was in the window seat beside me, staring out at Kathmandu Valley, or the shimmery gray circle of the prop, I couldn't tell. Amazing guy, that Buddha: *so* cool.

We rose out of the green, terraced, faintly Middle-Earth perfection of Kathmandu Valley, and flew over the mountains to the north, up into the land of snows. The other passengers, four Brits, were looking out their windows and exclaiming over the godlike views, and they didn't give a damn that one of their fellow passengers was an odd-looking chap. There was no problem there. After the plane had leveled out at cruising altitude one of the two stewards came down the aisle and offered us all little wrapped pieces of candy, just as on other airlines they offer drinks or meals. It was incredibly cute, almost like kids playing at running an airline, which is the sort of thought that seems cute itself until you remember you are at 17,000 feet with these characters, and they are now going to fly you over the biggest mountains on earth in order to land you on the smallest airstrips. At that point the cuteness goes away and you find yourself swallowing deeply and trying not to think of downdrafts, life insurance, metal fatigue, the afterlife. . . .

I shifted forward in my seat, hoping that the other passengers were too preoccupied to notice that Buddha had swallowed his candy without removing the wrapper. I wasn't too sure about the two across from us, but they were Brits so even if they did think Buddha was strange, it only meant they would look at him less. No problem.

It wasn't long before the steward said, "No smoking, if it please you," and the plane dipped over and started down toward a particularly spiky group of snowy peaks. Not a sign of a landing strip; in fact the idea of one being down there was absurd on the face of it. I took a deep breath. I hate flying, to tell you the truth.

I suppose some of you are familiar with the Lukla airstrip below the Everest region. It's set on a bench high on the side of the Dudh Khosi gorge, and the grass strip, tilted about fifteen degrees from horizontal and only two hundred yards long, aims straight into the side of the valley wall. When you land there all you can really see is the valley wall, and it looks like you're headed right into it. At the last minute the pilot pulls up and hits the grass, and after the inevitable bounces you roll to a stop quickly because you're going uphill so steeply. It's a heavy experience; some people get religion from it, or at least quit flying.

But the truth is that there are at least a dozen RNAC strips in Nepal that are *much worse* than the one at Lukla, and unfortunately for us,

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the strip at J— was at about the top of that list. First of all, it hadn't begun life as an airstrip at all—it began as a *barley terrace,* one terrace among many on a mountainside above a village. They widened it and put a windsock at one end, and tore out all the barley of course, and that was it. Instant airstrip. Not only that, but the valley it was in was a deep one—say five thousand feet—and very steep-sided, with a nearly vertical headwall just a mile upstream from the airstrip, and a sharp dogleg just a mile or so downstream, and really, nobody in their right *minds* would think to put an airstrip there. I became more and more convinced of this as we made a ten thousand-foot dive into the dogleg, and pulled up against one wall of the valley, so close to it that I could have made a good estimate of the barley count per hectare if I'd been inclined to. I tried to reassure Buddha, but he was working my candy wrapper out of the ashtray and didn't want to be disturbed. Nice to be a yeti sometimes. I caught sight of our landing strip, and watched it grow bigger—say to the size of a ruler—and then we landed on it. Our pilot was good; we only bounced twice, and rolled to a stop with yards to spare.

XVII

And so we came to the end of our brief association with Buddha the yeti, having successfully liberated him from people who would no doubt become major lecturers on the crank circuit forever after.

I have to say that Buddha was one of the nicest guys I've ever had the pleasure of knowing, and certainly among the coolest. Unflappable, really.

But to finish: we collected our packs, and hiked all that afternoon, up the headwall of that valley and along a forested high valley to the west of it. We camped that night on a broad ledge above a short falls, between two monster boulders.

Nathan and Sarah shared one tent, Buddha and I another. Twice I woke and saw Buddha sitting in the tent door, looking out at the immense valley wall facing us.

The next day we hiked long and hard, up continuously, and finally came to the site of the expedition's spring camp. We dropped our packs and crossed the river on a new bridge made of bamboo, and Nathan and Buddha led us up the cross-country route, through the forest to the high box canyon where they had first met. By the time we got up there it was late afternoon, and the sun was behind the mountains to the west.

Buddha seemed to understand the plan, as always. He took off my Dodger cap and gave it back to me, having shed all the rest of his clothes back at camp. I had always treasured that cap, but now it was really

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something special. Nathan put the fossil necklace back around Buddha's neck; but the yeti took it off and bit the cord apart, and gave a fossil seashell to each of us. It was quite a moment. Who knows but what yetis didn't eat these shellfish, in a previous age? I know, I know, I've got the timescales wrong, or so they say, but believe me, there was a look in that guy's eye when he gave us those shells that was ancient. I mean *old.* Sarah hugged him, Nathan hugged him. I'm not into that stuff, I shook his skinny strong right hand. "Good-bye for Freds, too," I told him.

"Na-mas-te," he whispered.

"Oh, Buddha," Sarah said, sniffling, and Nathan had his jaw clamped like a vise. Quite the sentimental moment. I turned to go, and sort of pulled the other two along with me; there wasn't that much light left, after all.

Buddha took off upstream, and last I saw him he was on top of a riverside boulder, looking back down at us curiously, his wild russet fur suddenly groomed and perfect-looking in the proper context. The yeti was a hard man to read, sometimes, but it seemed to me then that his eyes were sad. His big adventure was over.

On the way back down it occurred to me to wonder if he wasn't in fact a little crazy, as I had thought once before. I wondered if he might not walk right into the next camp he found, and sit down and croak "Namaste," blowing all the good work we'd done to save him from civilization. Maybe civilization had corrupted him already, and the natural man was gone for good. I hoped not. If so, you've probably already heard about it.

Well, things were pretty subdued in the old expedition camp that night. We got up the tents by lantern light, and had some soup and sat there looking at the blue flames of the stove. I almost made a real fire to cheer myself up, but I didn't feel like it.

Then Sarah said, with feeling, "I'm proud of you, Nathan," and he began to do his Coleman lantern glow, he was so happy. I would be, too. In fact, when she said, "I'm proud of you too, George," and gave me a peck on the cheek, it made me grin, and I felt a pang of . . . well, a lot of things. Pretty soon they were off to their tent. Fine for them, and I was happy for them, really, but I was also feeling a little like old Smedley at the end of the Dudley Do-Right episode: left out in the cold, with Dudley getting the girl. Of course I had my fossil seashell, but it wasn't quite the same.

I pulled the Coleman over, and looked at that stone shell for a while. Strange object. What had the yeti who drilled the little hole through it been thinking? What was it *for?*

I remembered the meal on my bed, Buddha and me solemnly chomping on wafers and picking over the supply of jelly beans. And then I was all right; that was enough for me, and more than enough.

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XVIII

Back in Kathmandu we met Freds and found out what had happened to him, over snitzel Parisienne and apple strudel at the Old Vienna. "By noon I figured you all were long gone, so when the bus stopped for a break at Lamosangu I hopped off and walked right up to these guys' taxi. I did my Buddha thing and they almost died when they saw me coming. It was Adrakian and two of the Secret Service guys who chased us out of the Sheraton. When I took off the cap and shades they were fried, naturally. I said, 'Man, I made a mistake! I wanted to go to Pokhara! This isn't Pokhara!' They were so mad they started yelling at each other. 'What's that?' says I. 'You all made some sort of mistake too? What a shame!' And while they were screaming at each other and all I made a deal with the taxi driver to take me back to Kathmandu too. The others weren't too happy about that, and they didn't want to let me in, but the cabbie was already pissed at them for hiring him to take his car over that terrible road, no matter what the fare. So when I offered him a lot of rupes he was pleased to stick those guys somehow, and he put me in the front seat with him, and we turned around and drove back to Kathmandu."

I said, "You drove back to Kathmandu with the *Secret Service?* How did you explain the fur taped to the baseball cap?"

"I didn't! . . . So anyway, on the way back it was silent city behind me, and it got pretty dull, so I asked them if they'd seen the latest musical disaster movie from Bombay."

"What?" Nathan said. "What's that?"

"Don't you go see them? They're showing all over town. We do it all the time, it's great. You just smoke a few bowls of hash and go see one of these musicals they make, they last about three hours, no subtitles or anything, and they're killer! Incredible! I told these guys that's what they should do—"

"You told the Secret Service guys they should smoke bowls of *hash?*"

"Sure! They're Americans, aren't they? Anyway, they didn't seem too convinced, and we still had a hell of a long way to go to Kathmandu, so I told them the story of the last one I saw. It's still in town, you sure you're not going to see it? I don't want to spoil it for you."

We convinced him he wouldn't.

"Well, it's about this guy who falls in love with a gal he works with. But she's engaged to their boss, a real crook who is contracted to build the town's dam. The crook is building the dam with some kind of birdshit, it looked like, instead of cement, but while he was scamming that he fell into a mixer and was made part of the dam. So the guy and the gal get engaged, but she burns her face lighting a stove. She heals pretty good,

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but after that when he looks at her he sees through her to her skull and he can't handle it, so he breaks the engagement and she sings a lot, and she disguises herself by pulling her hair over that side of her face and pretending to be someone else. He meets her and doesn't recognize her and falls in love with her, and she reveals who she is and sings that he should fuck off. Heavy singing on all sides at that point, and he tries to win her back and she says no way, and all the time it's raining cats and dogs, and finally she forgives him and they're all happy again, but the dam breaks right where the crook was weakening it and the whole town is swept away singing like crazy. But these two both manage to grab hold of a stupa sticking up out of the water, and then the floods recede and there they are hanging there together, and they live happily ever after. Great, man. A classic."

"How'd the Secret Service like it?" I asked.

"They didn't say. I guess they didn't like the ending."

But I could tell, watching Nathan and Sarah grinning hand-in-hand across the table, that they liked the ending just fine.

XIX

Oh, one more thing: *you must not tell ANYONE about this!!!* Okay? ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 127)

FINAL SOLUTION TO 987654321

Last month readers were asked to find a rearrangement of the numbers on a clock so that no triplet of adjacent numbers has a sum higher than 21. One answer: 1,8,10,3,5,9,4,6,11,2,7,12.

I found this problem in Dean S. Clark's paper, "A Combinatorial Theorem on Circulant Matrices," in *American Mathematical Monthly*, December 1985. Clark gives a short proof that the highest sum such a triplet can have, in any circular permutation of numbers 1 through 12, can't be less than 21, but he does not know how many permutations achieve this lowest bound. I would be pleased to hear from anyone who can tell me.

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

CRITICAL STANDARDS

At the outset of this essay on critical standards, I'm afraid I'm going to have to violate one of the most generally accepted rules both within and beyond the SF canon: don't review a book you haven't read.

I have before me *The Eleven Million Mile High Dancer* by Carol Hill. It is a science fiction novel. Its heroine, astronaut Amanda Jawarski, dresses in a Wonder Woman suit, rollerskates around the corridors of NASA, and has a magical cat named Schrodinger. After my third try at getting past page 60, I still can't figure out whether Ms. Hill is trying to be funny or not.

True, the book is filled with silly characters, sillier science, cartoon-level feminism, and the sort of garbalized use of quantum theory to legitimize vibrating mysticalism one would expect of a writer who appends a two page explication of quantum mechanics for the unwashed masses nearly half of which is a quote from Fritzjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*.

On the other hand, little of it is really funny, which is to say it is merely ludicrous, not humorous; trying to read this book for laughs is like watching a borscht-belt comic in his nethermost pit of Hades, bombing out forever with jokes that don't even get a hollow giggle.

But if *Dancer* is failed satire, one must then ask of *what*, and the only possible answer, alas, is of *itself*. Which, if it is meant as satire, is why it is so agonizingly unfunny, for satiric jokes just don't work when they have no real reference reality to play off.

I mean, give me a break, will you? I've saved you from the ghastly experience of trying to plow through 441 pages of this thing, so don't expect me to subject *myself* to such exquisite torture. This magazine doesn't pay me enough to get me to do that to myself, and neither could any other. Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa, I just can't drag myself through *The Eleven Million Mile High Dancer* to the bitter end, but I really must talk about it anyway.

Why?

Because I do not really believe, I think, that this novel is a failed attempt at humor. I think it much more likely that it is a failed attempt at *science fiction* by a writer of some talent who hasn't the foggiest notion of what science fiction

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really is. Breathes there an editor who has not seen this sort of first novel over and over again in the slushpile and sent it back with a form rejection slip after reading maybe twenty pages? If for some reason you were feeling perversely mellow enough to write a personal rejection letter, it would go something like this:

Dear Ms. Hill:

While *The Eleven Million Mile High Dancer* displays ample evidence of your prose skills on a sentence and paragraph level and a firm grasp of the mechanics of scene, dialog, and description, it is equally evident that you have attempted to write a science fiction novel with little or no study of the form itself.

Science fiction may be serious extrapolation, space opera, satire, or metaphysical speculation, but not all at once in the same novel, let alone in the same paragraph. If you intend to use scientific extrapolation as a story element, you must understand it at least well enough to convince a general reader that you know what you are talking about. If you are writing action-adventure, you must keep your tongue from getting stuck in your cheek, and if you are writing humor, try reading some of it out loud to see if anyone laughs.

Don't be too discouraged by this rejection, Ms. Hill. You obviously *do* have some talent for writing narrative fiction on a professional level. But I would strongly advise *reading* a wide sampling of science fiction novels before attempting to write one again.

Harried Editor

I can see you scratching your head out there. Okay, so some lousy first novel managed to escape from the slushpile into marginal publication, why bother to agonize over it in print at such length? It happens all the time, all it means is that some overworked editor needed something quick to fill a hole in the schedule and this was the least offensive thing available at the time.

Ah, but *The Eleven Million Mile High Dancer* is *not* Carol Hill's first published novel but her *third*. It comes festooned with laudatory blurbs for previous work by literary high priests like John Leonard and Alfred Kazin. It was reviewed on the whole quite favorably in important critical journals and national news magazines. Since it is so manifestly science fiction, albeit of a rather amateurish sort, one is led to the inescapable conclusion that a significant segment of the American critical apparatus considers it *good* science fiction.

What does this have to do with intelligent, informed critical standards?

Alas, one is led to another inescapable conclusion: not very much.

But it has a great deal to do with current American literary politics.

Science fiction, of course, has long been subject to a standard form of scatological abuse by the

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established American critical authorities, the latest incidence of which appeared recently in *Harpers*. The form and technique have become more or less standard (*Harpers* itself published a clone of this attack not so many years ago).

One commissions a writer with some critical credentials, though not an established heavyweight, someone who has either read little science fiction, or who regards it as an addiction of his youth, discarded along with the bubble gum card collection. This worthy then selects (or has selected for him) about a dozen SF novels, a few acknowledged fannish icons, the rest mediocrities chosen by a random number program from the thousands of novels that have been published in the genre since it was incarnated as such in 1926.

Surprise, surprise, the literary mercenary then discovers to his horror that what is touted by its practitioners and advocates as a visionary literature of ideas and scientific speculation actually consists chiefly of pulp action stories set in outer space, gadget-pornography for adolescent wimps, and militaristic power-fantasies.

SF can then be deported en masse from the sphere of serious literary discourse back into the ghetto for another few years, until it's time for the next pogrom.

Indeed, this form has become so stylized that the SF apparatus has even developed its own stylized form of response, and a neo-Marxist one at that.

According to this analysis, the motivation for these periodic hatchet-jobs, as well as the scanting that SF and SF writers get from the American critical establishment between them, is economic. A perusal of sales figures and best seller lists reveals that the SF ghetto has become the high rent district while the ivory towers of what is deemed "serious literature" by the impoverished practitioners and critics thereof are being torched by the landlords for the insurance money.

Science fiction is being read by larger and larger audiences and making more and more money, while these threadbare literateurs, having lost all contact with their readers, can only stand like Canute before the rising tide, impotently and forlornly commanding the wave of the future to roll back.

Certainly, human nature being what it is, this indeed does much to explain why significant science fiction works by significant science fiction writers are not regularly reviewed by significant critics in the literary journals and the news magazines. Most of these poor bastards don't even know what a non-zero-sum game is, let alone how to play one, and so to them, the authors of all those SF books they perceive as having usurped *their* rightful rackspace are a class enemy, which is to say, competing all too successfully for the same bucks.

But higher things than the Darwinian demographics of market share are involved in this conflict,

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for in a certain sense there *is* an intellectually legitimate disjunction between the world views of these two tribes of humans.

The preamble to the aforementioned *Harpers* piece railed on against technology, change, modern times, fancy TVs and cameras, and finally, with admirable unconscious honesty, amazingly enough, *innovation itself!*

". . . innovation itself has become an aesthetic quality, existing for its own sake . . . Technology has long been science fiction's conceit, now it is a conceit in real life as well. . . ."

This is a *complaint* as far as this world view is concerned, not a compliment, which may need to be pointed out to those who do not share it, for science fiction writers are forever boasting about the technology they conceived before the inventors of same, and more to the point would generally quite enthusiastically endorse the proposition that intellectual, emotional, cultural, technological, literary, even *critical* innovation is indeed its own ding an sich as an esthetic delight for both writer and reader.

This, of course, is what the genre alludes to as "sense of wonder," the heartfelt conviction that the experience of novelty—sensual, geographical, scientific, technological, esthetic, or emotional—is one of the deep intellectual and spiritual pleasures of being human.

Anglophone literary culture, like our civilization, has long had a difficult time with the concept that "science" and "spirit," "reason" and "emotion," "transcendence" and "realism," "esthetics" and "accuracy," "the soul" and the "intellect," "truth" and "multiplexity," "technology" and "the natural world," are not mutually exclusive dichotomies. That reality itself, as Brian Aldiss once so elegantly put it, is a multivalued motorway.

Why this is so and of what crisis in our evolution it speaks to would be the subject of endless novels, several of which I have already written, so suffice it to say for present purposes that these matters are central to the great historical nexus our species is presently attempting to negotiate, that they are the thematic material for much seriously intended science fiction, and that the sad fact is that the fiction generally regarded as "serious," "contemporary," and "engaged" by the arbiters of literary culture has thus far had severe conceptual and stylistic problems coming to terms with the multiplexity of post-Einsteinian reality.

If all you can see in the wave of the future is shock and dislocation and yourself being washed over, then of course you will take a dim and uncomprehending view of the space cadets and cyberpunks trying to ride the crest on jet-propelled surfboards.

So by extension into down and dirty *intellectual* social Darwinism, the neo-Marxist explication from within the genre can even account

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for the rough and iniquitous treatment seriously intended and literarily successful works of science fiction so often receive at the hands of the critical establishment when they are attended to at all.

The traditional critical establishment is well equipped intellectually to mercilessly skewer the prevalent literary vices of science fiction—action adventure plotlines, absence of complex emotion, lack of ambiguity, merely serviceable prose, stereotyped characters—in short the vices that critics inside the field all too often elevate to virtues as "the pulp tradition."

Come on, let's face it, there are something like four hundred new SF novels published each year, and the vast majority of them are going to be exactly what the critical establishment would deem them, commercial action adventure fiction with SF symbology, mere light entertainment, and intended as such by their authors.

This, while not quite the moral equivalent of child molesting it is sometimes painted as, is undeniably true. So those who are truly interested in the literary evolution of science fiction as an art form, should concern themselves not only with the shit this smears on their own covers, but with the danger that some of it may seep inside.

So when it comes to Sturgeon's famous ninety percent, the critical establishment is quite right. The vices and shortcomings of the great wad of science fiction published to fill all those rack slots are all too apparent to any critic perusing it with a remotely functional shit-detector.

So what goes wrong with said instruments when they pass them over something like *The Eleven Million Mile High Dancer*?

Okay, Carol Hill is a certified member of the tribe, so we can expect she'll be treated more tenderly than auslanders like Dick or Bester or Disch. But there really *is* a degree of integrity in established critical circles, and even if there weren't, few critics would be so self-defeating as to call a turkey like this a good book in public no matter *who* wrote it unless they really believed it themselves.

The thing of it is that most of the traditional critical establishment is entirely unequipped to deal with the other ten percent, with the twenty or thirty science fiction novels of serious intent which are published each year and which to a greater or lesser degree fulfill both the general literary parameters of excellence, and the unique central literary virtues of science fiction.

Rigorous visionary extrapolation of the future evolution of culture and consciousness based on a wide-ranging understanding of the physical nature of the universe and the individual psyche's feedback relationship with it is so alien a virtue to most establishment critics that they have big trouble even conceptualizing it, let alone *recognizing* it as a virtue or making a

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measured judgment as to what extent a work of fiction achieves it.

But after all, are these literary critics not the products of the same evolutionary process, the same cultural tradition, the same country, the same history, the same movies and books and TV programs, as those who fancy themselves the special dreamers with the stars in their hearts?

So if the visionary impulse which science fiction's central virtues seeks to evoke and entertain is basic to the human spirit, and who among us would be egotistical enough to publically contend otherwise, it can hardly be the private property of some We Favored Few.

So while the critical establishment may dismiss science fiction from its sphere of serious discourse as the commercial entertainment genre that grew out of the pulps, it is an ignorant dismissal which has never developed a comprehensive or remotely intelligible overview of what is actually being written by the best of the writers working behind those ghetto walls.

And in the best science fiction, written inside or outside of the ghetto walls, there is something that all natural men and women crave in their heart of hearts in one form or another unless they are totally spiritually dead, namely to transcend, if only for a moment or the length of a book, time, space, and mortality and contemplate some credible vision of one's destiny in the universe entire.

Bad science fiction and not much of it, like bad sex, is at least better than none at all. So the traditional literary critics, having dismissed genre SF and its practitioners on a categorical basis, look to their own favored sons and daughters to satisfy that elusive itch.

Which explains why something like *The Eleven Million Mile High Dancer* can be reviewed so favorably.

They read it with open minds because it was written by someone they were willing to take seriously. They liked it because it was something they could scratch that itch in public with, something that got them off without violating their belief system—science fiction free of distasteful genre identification.

They couldn't recognize that it was *bad* science fiction because they have no adequate critical overview of what *good* science fiction really is. To a horny virgin, even the performance of another sexual naif is probably going to seem like hot stuff.

Too bad for them, poor babies! I mean, anyone who could actually *enjoy* reading 441 pages of *The Eleven Mile High Dancer* would probably be ecstatic if he ever mischanced to read, say *The Stars My Destination,* or *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch,* or *Child of Fortune,* or, for that matter, probably even Doc Smith.

Too bad for us, poor babies, that we visionary dreamers are constrained to a literary purdah from which we must drive crying in our beer to the bank.

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Too bad for a civilization, poor babies, in which the apparatus of literary evaluation has malfunctioned to the point where the main literature dealing with its central cultural concerns at this evolutionary nexus is removed from the mainstream of intellectual discourse.

But worst of all for any science fiction writer of merit who is adopted as a "token nigger" in the grand high salons of literary power and allows ignorant praise to influence the work itself.

By all means accept the invitation to the party and all that it means—the enhanced advances, the better publication, the wider critical attention, the society of celebrities both of the media and the spirit. Trip the intellectual life fantastic.

But beware the Jabberwock, my son, the jaws that bite, the claws that catch, beware that in the process of reshaping your public identity as a science fiction writer into something more fashionable, you don't start tailoring *the work* itself to the specs of your less than expert intellectual admirers.

Alas, read *Always Coming Home,* and weep for what this process has done to Ursula Le Guin.

Le Guin's first three novels, *Rocannon's World, Planet of Exile,* and *City of Illusions,* were Ace SF paperback originals, a loosely connected trilogy set in a rather ordinary galactic future, certainly competent, but not really considered noteworthy at the time.

Then her fourth novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness,* an Ace paperback special published and edited by Terry Carr, won both the Nebula and the Hugo, and her career as a seriously regarded major writer within the genre was launched.

The sequence of what was actually written next is a bit unclear, but the next books to be published were the Earthsea books, a fantasy series for young adults which won the prestigious National Book Award as such. More or less meanwhile, *The Lathe of Heaven* was published, a multireality novel strongly influenced by the work of Philip K. Dick, which, though it didn't create the stir that *Left Hand of Darkness* did, showed a sure grasp of the form, and a deepening of Le Guin's sense of irony and ambiguity.

Then came the publication of *The Dispossessed,* Le Guin's "ambiguous utopia," which won another Hugo and Nebula, which is generally regarded as her magnun opus to date, and which is the last true science fiction novel she has written.

For by design or happenstance, that National Book Award for a juvenile series became her passport to higher literary realms, and her career began to change direction. Her stories stopped appearing in SF magazines for the most part and began being published in little magazines and literary quarterlies. She cracked *The New Yorker* and became something of a regular.

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One must admire her idealism and effort. She set out to use her good fortune as an entree into writing herself out of the ghetto and into literary respectability and she succeeded, knowingly sacrificing a certain amount of income in the bargain, at least initially.

Who within the ghetto walls but the meanest of spirits could do anything but congratulate her with communal pride?

Alas, only those willing to take a hard clear look at what happened to her work in the process.

As a science fiction writer, Le Guin's strengths had been a good descriptive eye, the ability to pile up details of an imagined world towards thematic ends, better than serviceable prose, and the ability to place believable if not memorable characters firmly in the matrix of their specific culture.

Her weaknesses were a tendency to turn her forthrightly political fiction into didactic exercises, and the unfortunate fact that her political insight tended to pivot simplistically about a dualistic misreading of Taoism in which yin is considered the way of virtue and yang the root of all evil, most nakedly stated in *The Lathe of Heaven,* but present as well in her portraits of the planets Anarres and Urras in *The Dispossessed.*

Sometime after the publication of *The Dispossessed,* Le Guin began to take pains to deny that she had ever been a science fiction writer, and with the publication of *Always Coming Home,* she has finally gotten the critics to entirely agree with her; all those Ace paperbacks are apparently a fluke or non-history and now it has been discovered that she was a "visionary" writer, not a science fiction writer, all along.

While this public transformation from "science fiction writer" to "visionary" was taking place, Le Guin's major published works were *Orsinian Tales,* a kind of generalized Ruritania story cycle, *Malafrena,* a novel in similar vein, and *The Beginning Place,* a fantasy which may or may not have been intended for young adults, as well as several long novellas.

Far from being visionary, these latter day works are pretty pallid stuff, lacking the extrapolative rigor and cultural specificity of Le Guin's science fiction, weak on character development, and too often coming off as schematic setups for her political message.

Which all too often is a *devolution* of the rather more ambiguous and sophisticated version to be found in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* into a political-cartoon of the supposed moral dichotomy between evil yang (militarism, technology, male dominance, capitalism, Faustian philosophical activism) and virtuous yin (passivity, ecotopia, socialism, decentralization, the noble granola-eating natural woman).

And now, with the publication of *Always Coming Home,* we see the awful truth, for precisely in the process of transforming herself from

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a science fiction writer into a "visionary," Le Guin has strayed far away from her cardinal virtues and into the self-indulgent morass of her worst weaknesses.

For it was precisely her virtues as a *science fiction* writer which gave her work vision, and having abandoned them as the things of childhood and bad literary karma, she has lost the creative center, sense of irony, and intellectual discipline which every would-be visionary writer must retain if she is not to devolve into a hectoring guru.

Always Coming Home is, on multiple levels, an enormous act of egotripping self-indulgence, yang to the max in yin clothing. The form of publication itself is an arrogant act of commercial seppuku, apparently insisted upon by the author. For $25, you are privileged to purchase a trade paperback that should cost about $9, packed in a slipcase with a cassette of amateurish quality on which you are treated to a pseudo-anthropological collection of song and music from "the Valley" of the novel which is an all-too faithful overture to the tedium of the text.

Imagine that Frank Herbert had written *Dune* as a 20,000 word novella, and then padded it out to 523 pages by doing a cut-up à la William Burroughs with the text of *The Dune Encyclopedia,* and you have the formal structure of *Always Coming Home.*

Conceptually audacious, it could have worked. The "nonfact" article is a well established SF form, *The Dune Encyclopedia* itself was rather entertaining, and there is certainly esthetic respectibility within the SF genre for making the created world the central character and story and humans secondary. And indeed, if the fictional thread was really well-integrated with the pseudo-documentary matrix, and insightful in and of itself, such a work could become a masterpiece of Nabakovian formal complexity.

But for it to work, the created world must be a sufficiently fascinating character in and of itself to carry a whole long novel, and the imbedded novella must add to the whole in a way that makes it greater than the sum of its parts.

Le Guin's retrogressive ecotopia is a valley and surrounding environs in a future central California in an era when the entire world has apparently been balkanized down to a tribal level, technology, scientific inquiry, and the exploration of the universe consigned as hopelessly yang to a net of artificial intelligences, and the Kesh, the yin white hats of the novel, live the bucolic good life of noble re-created and somewhat Disneyized American Indians.

The story line, such as it is, concerns a woman called Stone Telling, of Kesh mother and Condor father, who ends up living for quite a while in nasty Condorland, and then goes home, where she narrates her story into Le Guin's pseudo-anthropological annals.

So basically *Always Coming*

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Home is *Coming of Age in the Valley of the Kesh,* with Le Guin (or "Pandora" as she calls herself when she addresses the reader directly from within the text) as Margaret Mead. Customs, poetry, folk-tales, made-up language complete with glossary, religion, agriculture, and even recipes. Audacious! Ambitious! Four years in the writing! Coulda been the champ!

But only as interesting as the Kesh and their world itself. And the Kesh are boring. They lack eccentricity, real passion, ambiguity, complexity, and their culture is a kind of generalized Potemkin village designed to exemplify the Le Guin political and spiritual virtues, yet another recitation of the attributes of the yin half of the great wheel.

The yang half of the equation is represented in political-cartoon style by the Condors, evil male chauvinist paranoid imperialists, who conjure up a Reaganoid arms program literally deus ex machina, and are defeated by the peace loving third world peoples when they conveniently trip over their own dicks.

And what of the center about which the great wheel must turn, the center which, we all know, is Void?

Alas, the void at the center of *Always Coming Home* is called science fiction.

The Le Guin of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* just might have made this work as a novel whether one could accept the politics or not. Le Guin, the science fiction writer, knew how to build up a world, characters, story, out of a wealth of inherently interesting detail, how to raise her didactic impulses to thematic material for literary art. This is what it *really* means to be a visionary writer, flavor of the vision aside.

But the Le Guin of *Orsinian Tales* and *Malafrena* and *The Beginning Place* et al. is no longer a visionary writer in that deeper sense. Here we have almost a laboratory experiment examining what happens to a science fiction writer of merit who heeds the advice of her admiring establishment critics, not on matters of prose style, characterological depth, or formal structure, which they understand well, but on what is the wheat and what is the chaff when it comes to visionary science fiction, about which they do not know jack-shit.

Too many establishment critics confuse science fiction with allegory, too many of them see the medium as merely the mouthpiece of the message. Le Guin's political and cultural message happens to sync quite nicely with the current concencus zeitgeist in these circles, so if only she would get rid of the SF paraphernalia, they would be pleased to admit her to the drawing room.

But certainly at least *we* by now know that the medium *is* the message, or it should be, for it is precisely by applying an active innovative imagination to embedding the thematic material in the cun-

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ningly designed details of a living, breathing, striving, morally ambiguous world, that the science fiction writer, and arguably in our time the science fiction writer alone, may elevate the politically engaged novel out of the nether realm of didacticism and onto the level of literary art.

Once Ursula Le Guin set out to purge her work of that which made it science fiction, she was inevitably led down the primrose path of less and less cultural specificity, less and less complex world-building, less and less true visionary extrapolation, more and more generalized fabulation, nakeder and nakeder didacticism, a deadening confusion of her weaknesses with her virtues, and an elevation of the former at the expense of the latter.

Until at the end of this road, we have *Always Coming Home,* fave rave of the critical establishment, where the didacticism is quite dominant, and the relative vapidity of its vision unfortunately revealed by the almost total absence of the extrapolative rigor, saving irony, and visionary imagination of the author of *The Left Hand of Darkness* or *The Dispossessed.*

Yes, we have righteous reason to hiss and boo at the critical establishment for their hip-shooting from ignorance, their mean-spirited economic envy, and their intellectual incomprehension of the inner esthetics of science fiction, and certainly someone or something deserves to be pied for leading the likes of Ursula Le Guin down such a creative blind alley.

But perhaps rather than patting each other on the back on the way to the SFWA suite, we should look in on the hucksters' room and kick ourselves in the ass.

Not all critics from outside the genre are bounders and mountebanks and envious assholes and some of them, such as Leslie Fiedler and Bruce Franklin, have brought their powers to bear on works of science fiction with justice and understanding.

So what of a hypothetical top-flight outside critic who wishes to perform the noble task of explicating science fiction to the American intellectual generality, not in terms of its shortcomings, but of the best work it produces?

What can a poor boy do, one who was not raised on Doc Smith or Heinlein, who wasn't raised on science fiction at all, an eclectic intellect sincerely seeking to expand his range of literary knowledge?

He can't go into a bookstore and tell the action adventure stuff from the essays at literary greatness, since it's all packaged the same. And while the famous Big Four of Asimov, Clarke, Heinlein, and Bradbury all have their characteristic virtues, they can hardly be said to fairly represent the literary cutting edge.

So if he's to delve beyond the obvious or the random at all, his only reasonable recourse as a gentleman and a scholar is to peruse the existing critical literature for an

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overview with which to orient himself.

At which point he and we have met the mutual enemy.

And it is us.

In quantity, the existing critical commentary on science fiction is the literary scholar's wet dream. For while material on science fiction may be quite sparse in the annals of the established critical tradition, science fiction fans have been piling it up in enormous stacks of fanzines from here to Betelgeuse since the early Pleistoscene, or at least since 1930.

And there are Hugo and Nebula lists going back twenty years and more to contemplate. And enormous literary congresses called "science fiction conventions," where the leading literary lights, editors, and critics engage in learned symposia on the esthetics and thematic philosophies of their art for the delectation of the avid masses.

When it comes to quality, though, the level of literary discourse turns out to be not quite what he's used to, as he's menaced by sword-wielding barbarians, propositioned by Brunhilda in furs, given the hitchhiker's tour of the galaxy, and then sits down with the clap and a hangover to read through the archives of the Ackermansion.

Somehow, Professor Leavis, I don't think we're in Oxford.

It's not his planet, Monkey Boy.

The fanzines are no help. Most of the reviews are plot-summaries, and those that aren't vary randomly between the twin poles of insightfulness and complete assholery, often within the same issue of the same publication, since most fanzine editors have no informing literary philosophy or even standards of critical professionalism.

The critical academic journals? There are a handful, but most of the criticism within them, with some notable exceptions, is publish-or-perish stuff, narrowly-focused, repetitive, and more concerned with scholarly minutiae than any comprehensive evolutionary overview. Only *Foundation* really consistently strives to maintain such an overview, and that overview, though the best available, is somewhat idiosyncratically British.

The Hugos and the Nebulas?

Let's face it, the Nebulas and the Hugos have about as much to do with measured critical judgment and as much to do with personal politics and random factors as the Oscars or the Nobels or the Balrogs or any other set of artistic awards dreamed up by the mind of man.

They are by nature determined by an electoral process. All electoral processes have a political component and the outcome is determined by some form of numerical tabulation. So even in the best of worlds, the Hugos and the Nebulas cannot be other than literal popularity contests, measurements of the numerical popularity of works among the paying members of a science fiction convention on the

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one hand, and the creators thereof on the other.

Not surprising then that both of them are indiscriminately awarded to masterpieces and trivia, pace-setting works and cult-objects, as popular trends come and go.

Interesting for tracking such trends perhaps, but not much help to our poor would-be friend of the family trying to put together a coherent critical overview.

The science fiction magazines? A little better, at least when it comes to the current stream of SF publishing. There is one long-established critic of subtlety and sophistication who makes a bit too much of the virtues of the "pulp tradition," which he fortunately entirely eschews in his own excellent fiction. There is a bookstore owner giving concise consumer reports. There is a younger critic whose level is wildly uneven but capable of keen insight at his best. There is an anonymous sniping pseudonym. There is a long-time Big Name Fan. There is a would-be Big Name Fan who openly professes the thesis that "SF is literary television."

There is a novelist who maunders on in essays like this, writing about the likes of *him*, who hasn't been so much help either.

Hey, guys, will you drag yourselves out of the bar long enough to advise me what to tell this righteous professor? Any of you know where to find a rigorous, informed, and comprehensive body of critical literature adequately explicating the sixty year literary history of science fiction for the non-converted?

If we can't score him some soon, he's going to think we don't know how to party, throw up his hands in disgust, storm out of the convention, and write another of those ignorant hatchet jobs!

Guys . . . ? Guys . . . ?

Whoops, sorry, professor, catch ya later, they just told me it's time to go to the autograph party in the huckster room! ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

This is the high season for overseas cons, and your last chance to prepare for the WorldCon. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. (703) 823-3117 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. It's polite to send an SASE when writing cons. Early evening's good for phoning. Look for me at cons behind the iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge, with a musical keyboard.

JULY, 1986

25-27—**Fantasy Fair.** For info, write: **Box 566, Marietta GA 30061.** Or phone: **(404) 662-6850** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Atlanta GA (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: mostly media/comics. At the same site as WorldCon (a month later).

25-27—**ConVersion.** Carriage House Inn, Calgary AB. Jack (Well World) Chalker, Phyllis Gottlieb.

25-27—**Archon.** Clarion Hotel, St. Louis MO. Fred (Heechee) Pohl, artist Dell Harris. 10th year.

AUGUST, 1986

8-11—**MythCon.** Cal State U., Long Beach CA. Catherine deLint. Mythopoeic Society's high fantasy con (Tolkien, Lewis, C. Williams). Williams' centennial. "Daughters of Beatrice: Women in Fantasy."

23-24—**Japanese National SF Con, 201 Chanpier AWAZA, 1-6-8 Enokojima, Nishi, Osaka 550, Japan.** At the Suita-shi-Bunka-Kaikan (May Theatre). The 25th annual, the 5th called Daicon. 3000 expected.

28-Sep. 1—**ConFederation, 3277 Roswell Rd. #1986, Atlanta GA 30305.** Ray ("Something Wicked . . .") Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, Bob (Slow Glass) Shaw. The WorldCon for 1986. Join at the door.

SEPTEMBER, 1986

4-7—**CopperCon, Box 11743, Phoenix AZ 85061. (602) 968-5673 or 968-7790.** Laid-back "relax-a-con."

13-15—**CamCon, 17 Laing Rd., Colchester, Essex UK.** Cambridge UK. John Christopher. The 6th UniCon.

19-21—**Oxonmoot, % Curtis, 35 Martindale Close, Leicester LE2 7HH, UK.** Oxford, UK. P. Tolkien.

19-21—**MosCon, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843.** Artist Michael Goodwin, D. Ing, astronomer R. Quigley.

19-21—**EarthCon, Box 5641, Cleveland OH 44101.** Gordon R. Dickson, C. J. Cherryh, R. M. Meluch.

26-28—**DeepSouthCon, Box 58009, Louisville, KY 40258.** David Hartwell, S. Sucharitkul, artist Alex Schomburg, fan Ann Layman Chancellor. 24th annual Southern con. Masquerade, Hearts championship.

29—**XIICon, % "Beechfield," Calfmuir Rd., Lenzie, Glasgow UK G66 3JJ.** Another British con.

OCTOBER, 1986

3-5—**JAFCon, Box 510232, Salt Lake City UT 84151. (801) 322-4437.** Zelazny, Claremont, Busby.

11-12—**OctoCon, % Spellbinders, Box 1824, Santa Rosa CA 95402.** At the El Rancho Tropicana Hotel.

AUGUST, 1987

27-Sep. 2—**ConSpiracy, 23 Kensington CT., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton, England. World Con '87.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

5-8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Phoenix AZ. NASFiC 1987, held since WorldCon's abroad.

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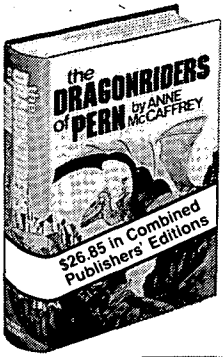

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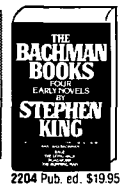

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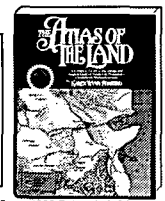

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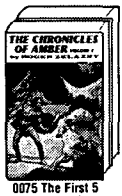

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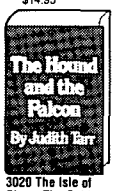

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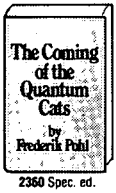

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